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PRINCE JOHN, DETECTIVE SPECIAL.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "SWEEPSTAKES SAM," "JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING," "MONTE JIM," ETC., ETC.



LOOKING UPWARD, PRINCE JOHN CAUGHT A GLIMPSE OF A HUMAN FACE IN THE OPENING.

Prince John, Detective Special;

OR,

Unmasking the Frisco Fire-Fiends.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD 49," "THE MAN FROM TEXAS," "MONTE JIM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

THE deep pitched tones of the fire bells rung forth upon the night-air, causing countless eyes to flash instinctively heavenward, even while trained ears were counting the strokes to ascertain the district in which the conflagration might be located.

This was before the days of electric lights, and admirably lighted though the city of San Francisco was, it was an easier matter then than now to so locate a fire.

"In the seventh!" cried the then fire-chief, Orson McAleney, voice audible even above the swift rush of men, clank of metal, trample of iron-shod hoofs, and all the other "orderly disorder" of sound and action which pervades an engine-house on such occasions. "Ready, Prince? Come with me, for— Jump in, man alive!"

Even so quickly the fiery horses had sprung under the suspended harness, where one hand clasped a buckle and its mate released a spring, biped and quadruped acting in perfect concert; where other men jumped into their fire-fighting suits even as they caught the polished pole with legs or arms, according to which were more nearly at liberty; sliding swiftly to the ground floor, and then clinging like barnacles to the engine or hose-truck as all dashed madly forth into the night.

Almost as quickly was the light rig of Chief McAleney in readiness for the run to the fire, and springing up beside him, John Prince gripped the seat-rail with all vigor as the chestnut mare broke away at top speed, trotting as though on the race-course with a rich purse hanging before her covetous eyes, with no rival's dust to mar its value.

"Seventh District, you said?" John Prince ventured, as they rapidly gained upon the team ahead of them. "Business, or resident?"

"Business. Eyes open. May mean work in your line: who knows?"

"So soon? Well, if so—"

No time to finish, then. Whirling around a corner, hugging the curb so closely that an accident seemed inevitable, the chestnut mare carried master and friend at top-speed, the seemingly frail rig spinning along on two wheels for several rods, saved from "a spill" only by prompt balancing on the part of both men.

Many a good man would have lost his nerve at this, but not so John Prince. He tightened his grip, and laughed aloud. That swift, reckless flight through the night stirred his blood until his skin prickled like one in an electric bath.

They passed the engine which had preceded them, but rapidly as they sped along through the night, others had reached the scene of action before them, and the turning of a corner brought into view all the wild confusion and mad excitement which so surely forms an accompaniment to a nocturnal fire in the city, where life and property both are endangered.

It took but a single glance to locate the fire: a brick building of three stories, the ground floor at least of which was devoted to mercantile interests.

Hardly waiting for the fire-chief to slacken speed, John Prince sprung from the buggy with a cat like activity not often seen in one of his substantial proportions, not losing a second in recovering his balance, for even while in air, his trained ear caught the shrill scream of a woman in mortal agony.

Almost by instinct his eyes flashed up the front of the endangered building, from more than one window of which smoke was streaming and flames were beginning to show their serpent-like tongues; but even as he sprung forward, he noted the difference: mortal agony of mind, not of body.

A mother crying for her child, until then forgotten in the mad hurry and confusion.

"Max—my boy—*mein kleine kinder!*"

Forgotten he—oh, my boy! my child! My—oh—oh—"

The nearly-crazed woman gave a succession of shrill, almost maniacal shrieks as she struggled desperately to break away from the friendly arms which restrained her from rushing into what seemed certain death, and John Prince turned away from that painful spectacle as though he had already seen enough of it.

Even so soon streams of water were being poured into the doomed building, for the Frisco Fire Department had not lacked for an abundance of practice of late; yet Prince was experienced enough to know at first glance that the building *was* doomed, and that it would call for almost superhuman efforts to keep the flames from spreading further.

The store was of no great frontage, yet an open door led to a narrow flight of stairs by means of which the upper stories could be reached; and taking in the situation with cool judgment, John Prince broke through the guarded fire-line, showing a card to the officer who blocked his way.

On that card was printed the name of Chief Orson McAleney, and in bold characters were written the words:

"Pass bearer, at all times."

"All right, sir, but— Crazy, by—!"

For, only stopping long enough to soak a large silk handkerchief at a leak in the nearest hose, John Prince made a straight shoot for that narrow stairway, mounting the steps four at a leap, his hands busy with that water-dripping kerchief.

Choosing ends so that the cloth would hang like an apron when in place, Prince tied the handkerchief tightly around his head, the upper edge coming over the bridge of his nose, just beneath his eyes. The two lower corners were left unknotted, but the saturated silk hung over nose and lips, chin and throat, clear down to his broad chest, in no wise hindering his breathing, yet effectually keeping out all smoke.

There was need of some such precaution, too!

Although the freshening breeze kept the entry comparatively clear as yet, John Prince had mounted less than a dozen steps before he found that passage choked with acrid smoke, and when he gained the first landing, he knew that further advance meant the peril of his life.

The smoke was hardly less dense here, yet he could see with some degree of distinctness, thanks to the red flames which showed ahead and on either hand.

As yet he could retreat, to safety, but should he venture further, who could say? At any moment the fire might take full possession of the staircase, and then—

No man could more thoroughly realize this fact than did John Prince, for fire fighting and fire investigating had been his business for a goodly number of years past; yet he hesitated merely to "place himself," then sprung into swift action again.

An open door showed to his right, and drawing hat further over his eyes as a shield against the ruddy flames which he saw beyond he leaped into the long apartment, only to stop short as suddenly on recognizing its nature.

"Not here—where are the living rooms?"

That was a store room, and retreating, Prince drew the door to at his heels, thus cutting off a certain portion of the dangerous draft.

Another door to the left, likewise open to the hall, showed him much the same prospects, and then, steadying himself while he drew on a pair of driving gloves, John Prince tried to make out his position.

Instinct and a natural good judgment served him better than eyesight, just then, for the smoke came swirling about him in suffocating eddies, hot and fire laden, added to rather than subtracted from by the streams of water being poured upon that doomed building.

The intense heat turned a goodly portion of this into steam, which blended with the smoke and seemed to make that still more dangerous to human life.

"Not here—the top floor, then?" flashed that keen brain in an instant, and knowing that there *must* be another stairway to gain that third elevation, John Prince sprung toward the rear of the building.

He surely had not passed by any flight of steps which could be used for such a purpose, and it could only be— Ha!

A dash of water coming from the rear, through a window where the glass was shattered by the force of the stream, partly cleared away the smoke and flames, and catching a glimpse of the stairway, the adventurer hastened forward, leaping up the flight actively as he had overpassed the first, thanks to that guarding square of wet silk.

It was like plunging headlong into a fiery furnace, he found, and his garments seemed fairly charring upon his limbs as he persisted until the head of the flight was gained.

"Tophet—hell itself!" came gaspingly from his lips as he involuntarily flinched from a sheet of yellow and crimson flame, the roaring of which rivaled that of a just-opened furnace. "Top and bottom! Fire-bugs, by the eternal!"

That recoil was but momentary. Rallying as swiftly, John Prince leaped upon that awfully heated floor, fighting the flames and smoke away from his eyes as he strove to recognize— Good!

One of those oddly fire-born draughts swept away the reddened smoke sufficiently for the man to glimpse a door ahead, and almost crawling on hands and knees to save his lungs, Prince gained the barrier, and finding it unlocked, opened and passed inside, closing the door as quickly as possible when he recognized where he now was.

Through the blinding smoke he could recognize furniture which proclaimed this one of the "living rooms," and staggering a bit as the breath came scorchingly through the now nearly dry shield of silk, John Prince rushed across to the bed, hands lending his smarting eyes aid as he cried aloud:

"Child—kid—young'un!"

The bed was unoccupied, and turning from it the daring rescuer looked around, almost in desperation; for no man could better realize the awful peril he was inviting by lingering there.

Again he shouted aloud, caring little what name he pronounced, just so as an answer was won from the missing child. And then, just when he was starting off to seek elsewhere, a shrill, yet choking cry came to his ear and directed his search aright.

"Holy Moses!" Prince panted as he caught up that shivering yet scorching mite from the corner into which terror had caused it to huddle. "A baby—nothing but a weenty kid!"

Even then he had room for wondering how a mother *could* forget a baby, hardly yet weaned from her breast; but this wondering did not hamper his movements in the least.

Springing to the bedside, Prince tore off a woolen blanket, dumping the child into its middle, then knotting the four corners together with practiced skill.

Thrusting his left arm through the double loop thus formed, swinging the crying, kicking burden around to his back, thus giving him nearly full use of both arms, the life-saver groped his way through that terribly thickening smoke, but bringing up against the blank wall in place of striking the door as he had calculated upon.

The loss of even a single minute might mean all the difference between life and death, but John Prince never for a moment lost his nerve, and in place of making another blind dive through the curling masses of smoke which, here and there showed red or yellow streaks, he groped along the wall with feeling fingers.

His hand struck something depending from that wall, and as his face came opposite it, Prince recognized a small coil of clothes-line, of which his left hand took instant possession. And then, a moment later, the door was found, the knob turned and the barrier flung wide open.

The awful roaring of flames drowned all sounds from the streets, but John Prince knew that the Fire Department were still fighting the devouring element; and never for an instant losing his sense of locality he bowed his head, still further protecting his eyes with a curving arm and gloved hand, then plunged desperately into what seemed—and what might easily prove to be—a veritable sea of fire!

That single look around had convinced him but a single hope remained for either

the child or himself: to gain the front windows.

The flight of stairs up which he had rushed so briefly before, was now a tunnel of flames, roaring, crackling, proof against all passage of aught less gifted than the fabled salamander.

Fortunately there were no more doors to open or pass through, and that there were few obstacles to interfere with that blind rush, else the life which had been so willingly risked for humanity might well have ended then and there.

As it was, John Prince reached the front wall of the doomed building, and then opening his smarting eyes, caught sight of an unshuttered window close to his left hand.

Smoke was swirling through one broken pane, but the others had as yet defied the heat, and had been missed by those curving jets of hissing water from the level below.

With a single kick, John Prince dashed out the lower sash, frame and all, then leaned forward to view the prospect; poor enough, surely.

At first glance all beneath seemed a whirling, writhing, curling sea of fire and smoke. From every window they came in sheets and puffs and scorching clouds, with red or yellow lances of fire shooting forth in hungry quest of food or victims.

Here and there a stream of water or a gust of wind cut through the heated veil, and even as John Prince caught sight of the crowded street, so far beneath, just so keen eyes sighted him as he leaned out at that window, framed in fiery smoke.

A shrill, far-reaching yell—then a roar of mingling voices as scores of excited human beings waved arms and poured forth advice which was strangely confused by the roaring of the devouring element.

That glance showed John Prince he had precious little to hope for from those below, willing and eager to help though they surely were. No ladder had been raised, and none could be while that network of wires so completely barred the way!

Only three stories high, yet it might as well have been a full score, since to leap meant death, or worse—a painful remnant of crippled life!

"Hello—you down below!" hailed Prince at the top of his voice.

CHAPTER II.

CHEATING THE FLAMES.

"Don't jump!" came back a vigorous voice which the endangered man had no difficulty in recognizing as that of Chief McAleney. "Wait! We'll cut the poles and—don't jump, man alive!"

"Stand by to catch a kid!" shouted John Prince, wasting no time in uttering needless denials, hands even busier than his tongue. "Get a canvas blanket—anything to break a drop! Get a hustle on, too!"

Only a faint, smothering wail came from that bundle as it was swung off his left arm, but there was no time for investigation just then; and while shouting forth those hasty directions, the life-saver was knotting one end of that coiled clothesline to the blanket, although he could see now that its length was all too short to reach the street level.

Nor was this the only peril which menaced that poor child, since it must be lowered through many feet of swirling smoke and lancing flames, each passing instant adding to the fiery gantlet between.

"Woolen, thank Heaven!" huskily panted John Prince as he drew the last knot tight as possible. "Maybe he'll get there all right. If not—Ready, you fellows below!"

He could only hope that such might prove to be the case, for just then eyesight could avail him very little. The entire front of the building was shrouded in smoky flames, and through this that poor babe must be lowered, if at all!

"In a mighty hurry, too!" decided John Prince, as he noted the ominous fact that the slender line was composed of loosely-twisted cotton. "If it burns through—All ready, you fellows!"

The gloves upon his hands were crisping and breaking with the heat at each motion of his muscular fingers. That blind groping along the wall in quest of an opening had well-nigh ruined them as a protection at all, and knowing this, John Prince, standing

close to the window, though which he began lowering the living bundle, threw a leg around the slender line as a partial protection to his hands.

He dared not look forth to watch that descent, lest what he might see should unnerve his hands, but trusting to good luck and Providence, he let the cord pass swiftly through his grip, only checking it enough to hinder an actual fall.

All too soon the end of that line was reached, and giving a hoarse yell by way of warning, John Prince let go, shivering a bit as he fancied what might be the result if—

"Thank God!"

A wild roar came from the street-level, telling him plainly enough that his hopes had not been all in vain, that the child had been caught in safety, so far as a fall was concerned. As for the smoke—well, that was another thing!

Men can act with marvelous rapidity when occasion urges, and long as it takes to give even an imperfect description of this exploit, in reality but a few seconds had been consumed by the life-saver from the time of his first reaching that front window.

Still, short as that time was, the flames had worked even more swiftly, and when John Prince felt free to care for his own life, he glanced back to see an almost unbroken wall of flame; a wall of fire which was rapidly moving his way, as though eager to swallow him up, or to drive him through that window to a hardly less cruel death on the pavement below.

There was no way of retreat left open, and seeing so much, John Prince quickly tore off his charring coat, and wrapping it around his right hand and arm, smote that upper sash with vicious power.

The glass had already shattered before the spray of a stream of water which a hoseman had directed that way at command of the chief; and now the woodwork yielded to that sturdy arm, leaving the tall frame free and unobstructed.

Stepping upon the wide stone sill, John Prince drew himself erect with back to the heated wall, edging along that narrow support as far as possible from the window, through which hot smoke was being colored by hotter flames as the fire ate its way onward.

Another involuntary roar from the excited crowd below as they saw this, for not one among them all but what firmly believed this man's fate was sealed beyond redemption. One wild roar, then—silence!

They saw but imperfectly, thanks to the eddying flames and swirling smoke which intervened, but still they could see that apparently fated mortal swinging his arms as though preparing for a leap which should carry him out past those flames; a leap which surely meant death!

On his side, John Prince could see ever less than those below, since he had heat as well as all else to encounter in looking downward; but he merely looked long enough to see that some were plying axes at the base of those wire laden telegraph poles, while others were hurrying up with mattresses and other articles to form a pile which might, through Providence, break that awful fall.

Only a leap could possibly save the endangered man, as no one knew better than John Prince himself, and he was preparing for that leap when that painfully interested cry arose from the many witnesses below.

He knew it would be worse than vain to think of waiting for those wires to be cleared away sufficiently to permit a ladder being raised to the third story. And even then those roaring flames would prove a barrier through which no man could hope to pass with life left him!

And so, standing balanced there upon a scant two inch width of cut stone, with his back scorching against that terribly heated wall, and the flames roaring as they lanced forth through that open window at his side, John Prince lifted his arms—not to gain impetus for that leap for life, as yet, but to thrust hands into the sleeves of his coat, and then twist the body around his arms!

This done, he measured his distance with an eye that, despite the awful stake he was playing for, was true and accurate. Then, slightly crouching on the sill in order to gain the necessary impetus, the bold adventurer

leaped out and downward, giving a clear, ringing cheer as he left that heated support!

Down—down—until his muffled hands, arms, chest, all struck fairly on top of those taut wires, yet which yielded sufficiently to break the force of his fall, although they the next instant cast that living burden off, to turn partially over while in mid-air, and before striking the street almost at the opposite gutter!

John Prince alighted upon his feet, fairly and squarely, and though the heavy shock caused him to fall, he was up again before a single one of the many spectators could offer him a holding hand.

Chief McAleney came with a rush, and his strong arms were about the man before Prince could fairly rally from his fall, and his voice was pouring forth eager hopes and fears, when—

"I'm all right, and—give me a show to—How's the kid, chief?"

Then came the usual rush of hero-worshippers, paying no heed to the danger-line, bearing down the rope and carrying police with them as they flocked around the sensation of the hour.

Laughingly John Prince protested as the charred coat was torn from his reddened hands and arms by the hands so eager to clasp his in admiration. He had done nothing but his duty. Any other man would have done the same, only—

"Only they didn't!" supplied a voice, the owner of which was unable to prove his admiration by actual contact just then.

"Because they didn't have my talisman, you know!" mockingly retorted Prince, freeing himself from those eager hands with an exercise of strength which did his muscles credit. "One born for the rope is proof against both fire and water, don't ye know?"

At a signal from Chief McAleney, one of the pipe-men turned nozzle that way, slowly sweeping across the excited crowd, tripping many up as the water struck their shins, and causing a general "scatteration" away from that spot and past the danger-line once more.

Spared by that deftly-handled jet of water, the fire chief and his young friend moved further away from the burning building, the front wall of which was beginning to crack before the intense heat and the influence of the water which was so freely being poured upon the fire.

But John Prince had not yet escaped the consequences due his bold exploit, for scarcely were the friends clear of that enthusiastic crowd, than one with a far better right to feel gratitude rushed up, face wet with tears, eyes reddened, hands trembling as they closed upon one scorched arm of the life-saver.

It was the mother of the forgotten child, and she poured forth a flood of words such as no man could fairly follow; yet her meaning was perfectly clear.

To him she owed a life—a double life, in fact, since she must have died of mingled grief and shame at having forgotten her babe—the only one left her of many!

She could not say it; words choked her, they grew so large in her poor throat; but she could never forget—she would never cease praying to the Mother of Christ that all joys, all blessings, all good things might come the way of this noble gentleman who—ah! if she did not choke so with the words she tried to utter!

John Prince shrunk away from this poor woman, showing far less nerve than he had while facing the fire-death. He stammered something, he hardly knew what, and only drew a free breath when Chief McAleney interfered on his behalf.

"That's all right, and we'll see you later, Mrs. Dussing," he said, giving her a friendly shove away from that spot, beyond the rope which marked the limits open to the citizens for the time being. "Go to your baby, and don't forget it again, please!"

"Nor you, my noble sir!" cried the mother, breaking away from that guiding hand and rushing back to John Prince. "My life is yours! I will repay—I will die for you, if I may!"

Now that there was no retreat left open, the life-saver manfully faced the ordeal, and giving those toil-hardened, trembling hands a friendly grasp and shake, he said:

"Better yet, ma'am; say you'll live for

that kid—for your child, I mean! And now—see you later, if you like, but just now—we're a bit too close should that wall take a tumble out this way, ma'am!"

Helping Mrs. Dussing across the rope, then leaving her in charge of a bare-headed, wild-eyed man who seemed a relative of some sort, since he called her "Rika" in none too gentle a tone, Prince hurried away to another station, from whence he could watch the really magnificent work of the Frisco Fire Department.

Standing on the corner, and adjoining the blazing building, was a massive, stone-and-brick structure, six stories high, with a basement.

For a time it seemed an utter impossibility to keep this valuable piece of property from sharing the ruin which had overtaken its neighbor, and even yet it was not beyond danger; as that heavy roof fell in, and some of the walls began to crumble, myriads of sparks and blazing embers filled the air, covering that huge pile with cinders.

But fearless and skillful men were at work, under cool, practical direction, and little by little the battle was fought and the victory won; the fire, once so menacing, was confined to the walls within which it had originated.

Not until this fact was fully assured did Chief McAleney give himself time to question his younger friend as to his dangerous experience inside that building. But then, in guarded tones he did ask:

"What did you see, Prince John? Anything to hint at—fire-bugs?"

The man whose name was thus oddly transposed, cast a quick, cautious look around, as though thinking of possible eavesdroppers; but if none such were visible, he saw something else which served as well, and in the same lowered tones he spoke:

"Not exactly, but—tell you later, chief. Just now—some one looking for you, I fancy, McAleney!"

A slight turn of eyes and head lent point to his hasty words, and as the fire-chief turned that way, he instantly caught sight of the same form which had attracted the notice of his companion.

A young man, something above the average height, slender, yet with a shape which promised far more than ordinary strength and activity, was forcing a passage for himself through the crowd about that guarded rope, his dark eyes gleaming redly in the fire-light, his handsome face showing pale yet full of an almost savage resolution as he looked ahead.

"It's young Quayle—Gerald Quayle," muttered Chief McAleney, as he recognized that figure and that face. "That's Quayle & Co's store," with a nod toward the fire-blackened but saved structure.

"He's a partner, then?"

"I hardly think so—yet. Father's head and tail, I fancy, but—he *does* want me, for a fact!" breaking off that hasty explanation as the young man caught sight of his uniformed figure, calling aloud his name as he leaped over the fire-guard and brushed past the policeman on duty at that point.

"I want you, chief," he said, abruptly, as he came up. "There's devil's work going on, and—who's this man?" breaking off abruptly as he seemed to notice Prince John for the first time.

CHAPTER III.

DAMNING PROOF AGAINST—WHOM?

GERALD QUAYLE flashed a keen, almost suspicious look into that fire-marked face as he spoke, but Chief McAleney was equally prompt of tongue, and with a hand checking the instinctive recoil given by John Prince, he quickly introduced the two men by name, adding:

"One you can trust as implicitly as you might trust me, Quayle, so speak out. What sort of devil's work?"

"Arson, no less!"

"What! Do you *mean* it, man?"

"Wish I didn't have to, but how can I help it? When I first saw—"

"Lower, man, dear!" muttered the fire-chief, his grip tightening and his blue eyes, looking green under that light, flashing as with an internal fire as they swept around on all sides. "This way, the both of ye!"

Even where so many interested beings

were congregated, there was a choice of points for those who desired a degree of privacy, and to one of these spots Chief McAleney hurried his younger companions, then faced Gerald Quayle again, to keenly search his face as he demanded once more:

"Now, out with it, my man! What have you discovered?"

"An infernal plot to ruin and destroy—come with me, sir, and see for yourself, then!"

Gerald Quayle turned away in the direction of that big building, but once more the ready hand of the fire-chief checked him.

"Arson, you said; in your store, then?"

"I'm *trying* to tell you so, yes. Come and see what—"

"Go easy, then. If even a hint gets out that way, we'll have such a rush from the crowd that a regiment of fixed bayonets couldn't repel them," said McAleney, with forced composure, although his eyes betrayed with what intense interest he was hearing this new development.

"I'll create a diversion to cover you, if you like," coolly spoke up John Prince; but his friend swiftly objected.

"No, I want you along, man. Say no more, but—just as though you had no burning interest, Quayle."

His own coolness, forced though that clearly was, produced much of the effect aimed at, and with his fierce excitement materially toned down, Gerald Quayle led the way outside of that fire-line, with the two men moving in that same direction, yet hardly seeming to be in his particular company.

Although the victory was almost certainly won by the firemen, and the chances now in their favor so far as confining the fire to that one building, the scene was still exciting enough; there was still ample food for interest for the spectators, and even the fire-chief might shift his station in a hurry without attracting especial attention his way.

Just lingering long enough to let fall a whisper near his assistant chief, placing him in full charge of the work that remained to be done, Orson McAleney made his way through the crowd with John Prince in his company, regaining sight of young Quayle when the corner was fairly turned, bringing them within view of the main entrance of the store.

Here a number of persons seemed to be on guard, probably employees of the firm, although there were no signs to show that any organized attempt had been made to empty the building of its valuable contents.

"Well insured, don't you reckon?" suggested Prince, as he took note of this fact with trained eyes.

"Of course. Bantry Quayle is a born business man, and—there's his son, waiting for us, now!"

"Hadn't I better fall back a bit, chief? Unless looks lie, that gentleman would rather sing his little song in your ears alone."

"I want you, and that's enough," curtly answered the official. "It isn't *his* say-so, after the charge is once made, and—here we are, you see, Mr. Quayle!"

Gerald's face showed almost ghastly pale by that ruddy glow, but before he could speak, Orson McAleney added, to cover their movements:

"Show us to your roof, please, sir. The outlook seems fair, but—thanks! Come, Prince; we'll just run up and make sure all's right!"

Under cover of these words three men entered that building, and it was not until they were where no other ears could catch his words that the fire-chief spoke out in blunt terms:

"Now, out with it, Quayle! You've found—just what?"

"There's been an attempt made to burn this store, sir," came the low, almost husky answer as the young man made a nervous gesture with a tightly clinched fist.

"You are positive as to that? It's not just carelessness, then?"

"Devilishness, rather!" came the fiercely earnest resort. "Carelessness or accident may have fired Dussing's place, but never *this* one! If ever an attempt at arson was coolly and deliberately made, that effort was made this very night, and right under this roof, sir!"

"You left the proofs as you found them, I hope, Mr. Quayle?"

John Prince uttered these words, and his face, handsome despite the red and black of heat and smoke, showed a powerful interest in the matter. Gerald Quayle gave a little start as though he had until then forgotten the presence of a stranger.

"I don't know—you vouch for him, McAleney?"

"As for myself, yes," came the prompt response. "Your father has certainly heard of him, even if you haven't, Quayle; John Prince, a Special employed by the insurance companies."

The young man shook his head like one hardly satisfied, asking:

"On what paper, sir?"

"Not a reporter at all, Quayle, but a Special Agent, out here to look over the ground and see what—I'm going his bail, you understand?"

These words came with sharp impatience, and Gerald Quayle bowed before them like one at least partially reassured.

"It's all right if *you* say so, of course, chief. Only—father is not down-town, yet, and I thought it better not to let the public catch wind of it all until—"

"I'm his voucher, you understand?"

"That's enough, chief."

With his last scruple banished, Gerald Quayle turned to lead the way from the ground floor, curtly explaining that as the elevator was not working, they must climb the stairs.

"Unto the stars, if needs be!" grimly declared Orson McAleney as he trod close upon those heels. "I'd climb that height right willingly on the bare chance of winning a positive clue to those infernal fire-bugs! And—it's not a mare's nest, Quayle?"

"You shall judge for yourself, sir," came the crisp answer.

The heat of the neighboring fire had penetrated even those massive walls, rendering it almost suffocatingly close within; but keenly as those two pair of practiced eyes swept around on all sides, not a single sign of fire was detected.

Gerald Quayle led the way up two pair of stairs, his eager speed only slackening at the third floor in answer to the rapid pantings of Orson McAleney, whose fifty-odd years and increasing weight were beginning to tell on his wind, reluctant though the worthy official was to admit as much, even to his secret self.

At the head of each flight an old-lamp was burning dimly, although the huge building was fully fitted out with gas, almost as a matter of course. Still, no remark was made, for with a raging conflagration so perilously nigh at hand, it would be a reckless man who would turn on the gas that night.

"This is the floor," said Gerald Quayle, with a glance over his shoulder as he started ahead once more. "You shall see for yourself, Mr. McAleney! Right there—in yonder room!"

They were facing the main front of the building, now, and Gerald Quayle was hurrying along the spacious apartment, heavily stocked with goods on shelves and tables and still in cases, making for a white-painted partition near the further end of the room.

Opening a door in this division, he sprang through, out of sight of his followers for the moment; but then there came a bright flash of light as a match was struck and applied to one of the gas-burners.

"You do the talking, and I'll take notes," John Prince hurriedly whispered to his companion as they moved forward. "Soothe him down if he turn suspicious, and keep him in play until I give nod or wink."

"You bet I will, Prince!"

There was no time for further speech. Gerald Quayle showed himself at the door, his handsome face paler than ever as he signed for them to enter, stepping aside to give them free passage.

As they entered, he closed the door behind, then sprang forward to show and to explain.

"I told you—*see!*" with an excited gesture backing up his words. "Devil's work, isn't it, Chief McAleney?"

Those two pair of keen eyes were already

at work, taking in their present surroundings, making mental note of every item which could possibly be of use in the future; and this is what they saw.

A bedchamber, fitted up with simple conveniences, fairly neat, yet plainly cheap as to plenishing.

In one corner stood the narrow, single bed, with head against the front wall, close to the corner window. The clothing was rumpled, as though its occupant had hastily left the bed when the fire alarm broke forth upon the still night air.

From the wall hung a few garments of masculine wear, of good material, though rather "loud" as to colors, and over which hung a dust-cloth, now loosened at one end as through accident or carelessness.

A couple of ordinary wooden chairs, a wash-hand stand, with bowl and ewer, a long pine table painted white, the last article now supporting a burden strange to be seen in a gentleman's sleeping apartment!

To all of the rest those keen eyes gave but a single comprehensive glance; but *this* was far different!

"Here's your mare's nest, Mr. McAleney!" said Gerald Quayle, with an out-flinging hand as his glowing eyes turned upon the interested face of the fire-chief. "Does *that* look like—"

"The devil and all his imps!" fairly exploded the officer as his trained eyes took it all in at a single sweeping glance.

A metal lamp lay upon that broad table, chimney broken, oil escaped, just as though the whole had fallen from its bracket above; a support which was likewise broken, seemingly through accident.

Close to where the metal lamp lay, there was to be seen a truly infernal contrivance, such as only a born incendiary could have evolved from the depths of a fiendishly ingenious brain and heart.

A broad ring of gunpowder lay upon that oil-soaked table of painted pine, itself inflammable to a degree. Inside of that explosive circle rested a bladder so full of some sort of fluid that it was only slightly flattened by its own weight, the greasy skin having been dilated to such an extent prior to its use for this devilish purpose, that one could distinctly see the liquid stir and wave as Gerald Quayle gave it a finger-touch.

"Benzine, by glory!" ejaculated Chief McAleney as he bent nose to the bladder with a strong sniff.

"And a fuse—see!" hoarsely added young Quayle, calling attention to another portion of that infernal machine. "Look! Only for this—what hindered it from burning a few inches further, then?"

"Don't touch it, man!" sharply cried Prince John, snatching back the young man's hand as it moved toward that telltale fuse. "Wait until—*you* first, chief!"

More than one half of the fuse had been burned, leaving a trail of black and gray ash to mark its original length, still retaining its natural size if not its original density.

First McAleney, then Prince bent over the ash, but it was the last named who offered a probable solution.

"The fuse was imperfect! That shows plainly enough *now*, but it must have been hidden when— Surely a fire-bug would not risk so much without a careful examination of his tools?"

"Who rooms here, Quayle?" bluntly demanded the fire-chief.

"Herman Richter, our bookkeeper, sir. You must have seen him?"

"I reckon," with a curt nod of assent. "Where is he now?"

Those shapely shoulders gave a shrug, almost Parisian in its significance; but then the young man answered in words:

"You answer, chief, for I really can't!"

McAleney glanced toward the rumpled bed, but said nothing for the moment. His heavy brows gathered sternly, however, although his next query touched an entirely different point of the case.

"Who acts as night-watchman here, Quayle?"

"No one, sir. We subscribe to the private police fund, of course, and with our head bookkeeper spending his nights here—"

Another shrug finished the sentence plainly enough for all.

"What do *you* think, Quayle? Who set

this fire-trap?" asked the officer, with a gesture toward that telltale table.

"What *can* I think? What would *you* think, in *my* place, sir?" quickly asked Gerald, then giving a sudden start as the sound of rapid footfalls came to their ears from the floor without that chamber.

CHAPTER IV.

THE POLICE IN CHARGE.

SOMEBODY'S coming to—who is it?" ejaculated the fire-chief as he caught those hardly welcome sounds.

"The police. I sent in a call when I discovered—I didn't stop to think what might be the wisest course of action, for—"

But Chief McAleney was paying no attention to his hasty explanation, just then. Striding across to the door, he opened it, face stern-set and repellent until he recognized a well-known face and figure.

"You, Paulette? Good! since the police *must* chip in, why—"

"What's gone wrong here, Mr. McAleney?" came the deep-pitched, grave tones of San Francisco's then head of police, Virgo Paulette. "A call came to the Central, and as I knew a fire was working in this same district—good-evening, gentlemen."

That proudly poised head bowed politely as its owner stepped inside the chamber, and though those keen eyes surely must have taken note of something far out of the ordinary, not a line of that grave, still handsome countenance was permitted to alter.

San Francisco has many a noted name on her records, both for good and evil, but of them all there is hardly one of greater note than that of Virgo Paulette, for several years at the head of her police force.

Now in the height of his celebrity as the boldest, strictest, best and most daringly original of all police chiefs the City of the Golden Gate had ever known, Virgo Paulette surely merits a line or two by way of personal description.

He stood a trifle above the six-foot standard, and was now in the very prime of life. His frame was massively built, seemingly all bone and muscle, yet his movements were easy, active, smooth; in that respect he might be said to resemble the gaunt, big-boned cougar.

His hair was of a peculiar foxy-red, as was that worn upon his face, only his broad, firm chin being smooth-shaven.

His eyes, rather small and too closely planted for beauty, were blue as the summer sky, and almost as unfathomable to ordinary vision.

His voice was strong, deeply pitched, yet mellow and even musical in its natural notes, just as his ordinary manner was polite, even mild; but when thoroughly aroused—look out all!

Those blue eyes turned to living coals of fire; those tones grew stern and deadly; that face showed fierce and pitiless toward all evil-doers, then.

While making his bow to the younger men, Chief Paulette took in all his surroundings at a glance, and then, before saying more, turned back to the door which he held partly ajar while uttering:

"Wait where you are, officer, please. If wanted, I will call you."

Closing the door again, the chief of police looked inquiringly into the face of the youngest gentleman, mildly speaking:

"You requested an officer, I believe, Mr. Quayle?"

"I did, sir, but—"

"Oh, don't mind us, I beg of you, gentlemen," briskly cut in McAleney as he recognized the point which embarrassed the young man. "Unless all signs lie, this is a job for police as well as my department. And so—here's something worth your looking at, I fancy, Paulette!"

A wave of the hand called attention to that significantly burdened table, but not a muscle seemed to alter in that grave yet mild-seeming countenance as the chief of police turned that way to begin a methodical inspection of the damning proof of attempted incendiarism.

With keen though covert interest Prince John watched the officer through all. He had heard much of this man, and since ar-

riving in San Francisco with his credentials to the heads of both departments here represented, had seen just enough of Virgo Paulette to wish to learn a great deal more.

This seemed to offer a fair chance, and with keen interest the Insurance Special took his mental notes.

Quickly yet thoroughly the chief of police inspected that damning evidence against one as yet unknown, then turned to young Quayle and asked in his mildest tones:

"You made this discovery, sir?"

Gerald Quayle bowed assent.

"Please explain just how it came about, will you, sir?"

"Of course; why not?" with sudden brusqueness as shoulders shrugged and hand flung out, a reminiscence of his recent tour abroad. "I was down-town when the alarm was given; I did not go out home, this evening, you understand?"

"Exactly," with a mild bow of understanding. "You live so far out, of course."

"That's about it, yes, sir. And so, as I knew it was our district, of course I hurried this way. 'Twas a hearty old scare, too!" as he forced a half-nervous laugh. "I thought sure 'twas *our* place, and then—but that don't count!"

"You do not employ a regular watchman, I understand, Mr. Quayle?"

"Not since we caught the third one so employed stealing the goods he was innocently believed to be protecting," with a short, hard laugh.

Chief Paulette glanced toward the rumpled bed, and Gerald Quayle gave a curt nod of comprehension.

"I'm coming to that part, sir. And I also thought of the man who rooms here, when I came up, to find the building next door all aflame, with the crowd making noise enough to rouse the dead, yet—our doors were fast-locked!"

"To which doors you carry a key, of course?"

"Of course. And I used mine, too, be sure, sir! I thought of sending out a call for men to remove stock before the store could catch, but then I wondered how it was possible for mortal being to sleep through such an infernal racket. And then—ugh!" with a shiver and a shrug at the bare memory.

"You fancied this sound sleeper might be in peril, perhaps?" gently suggested the chief of police.

"You'd ought to hang out your shingle as a soothsayer, sir!" half-nervously laughed the young man, then quickly adding: "I *did* think that, for a fact, and that sent me up the stairs quicker than I ever climbed them before. And then—*this*!"

Gerald Quayle made a dramatic gesture, one hand toward the rumpled bed, its mate indicating that imperfect fire-trap.

"You found this chamber empty, then?" mildly asked the chief. "Who did you say rooms here?"

"Herman Richter, our head bookkeeper, sir," was the prompt reply. "I found everything precisely as you see it now, save that I've lit the gas where all was in darkness then."

"The bed was—just so?"

"Yes. I touched nothing, for I was like one half-petrified. I saw *this*," was the shivering glance and little nod toward that infernal machine. "Saw it first of all, for I struck a match and held it still until the flame should show me the bracket-lamp. And then—well, I hurried to send in a police call, then looked for possible fire elsewhere."

A bit brokenly, and hardly as coherently as might have been wished for, yet that explanation covered all essential points, after all.

Chief Paulette said nothing for a few moments, but once again slowly swept his gaze around that room, permitting nothing to escape his photographing eyes. Then he turned abruptly upon the young man, his voice growing a bit harder as he spoke:

"Herman Richter occupies this room alone, I believe?"

"As a rule, yes. Sometimes I fancy he brings in a friend for the night, though."

"There is no rule against his so acting, is there?"

"No rule, of course, but father—the head of the establishment—has more than once hinted against such a proceeding."

"You believe that Herman Richter rumpled that bed, of course?"

"Who else, then?"

"And if so, he must have known of this fire-trap, even if he didn't arrange it himself? Is that *your* belief, Mr. Quayle?"

"I haven't *said* so, have I? Still, what other view is possible?"

"Then you lay a charge of attempted arson against Herman Richter?"

A hot, half-angry flush leaped into that handsome, almost beautiful face, but Gerald Quayle coldly retorted:

"No, sir, I make nothing of the sort. I've called for the police to take charge, and you have answered that call in person. Now—take full charge, and act as your best wisdom may direct, sir!"

With a stiff bow, the young man drew back, but if he thought to irritate the officer, he counted without his host. With a bow much cooler, a great deal lower, Chief Paulette said:

"Very well, Mr. Quayle. I take charge at your request."

"In the name of my father, of course," supplemented the son, in less offish tones. "He will be even worse shocked than I have been, but I know he'll wish strict justice administered, let the blow fall where fate directs."

"And you, my dear sir?"

"Stand ready to bear witness to all I have this night discovered, as a matter of course, sir."

"I could ask no more than that, sir, and you have my thanks in advance. Now—oblige me, please?"

A glance and a bow toward the door pointed his meaning clear enough for the others present, and with Chief McAleney leading the way, and Chief Paulette bringing up the rear, the chamber was left in darkness once more, with that diabolical fire-trap still intact, just as first exhibited to wondering eyes.

With a bunch of his own keys Chief Paulette locked the chamber door, then a word from his lips sent the uniformed officer down to the next floor, in advance of the little company.

But there the chief appeared to alter his mind, since he turned to utter a few whispered words which sent the policeman back upstairs, the others keeping on their way until the luxuriously appointed office on the ground floor was gained.

"Look around, please, and see if everything is in order here, will you, Mr. Quayle?" mildly asked Paulette, his own eyes glancing methodically around the office. "The safes?"

Gerald Quayle was not long in making the examination asked, and as a result of his tour, reported everything in order, so far as such a necessarily imperfect search could decide.

"The safes are all right, I know, for they could not be forced without marring signs, if at all."

"Could they not be opened by one with the combination, though?"

"No. They are fitted with time-locks."

"Then there has been no open robbery," with a nod of relief. "And now, Mr. Quayle, to how many persons have you communicated this discovery of yours?"

"You can see for yourself, sir," with a wave of his hand which comprised the trio present besides himself. "Only to you three gentlemen."

"All of whom know enough to keep a secret, I imagine," with a mild smile and polite bow. "Will you oblige me by agreeing to tell none others—save and except the head of this firm, of course?"

"Willingly, sir," came the instant answer.

"Then there is nothing more to say, I believe, and, with your kindly permission, gentlemen, I will complete my arrangements for taking full charge of these premises, until this matter can be fairly investigated."

There was no objection raised to this course of procedure, and the chief of police set systematically to work, placing a trusty officer in charge of the office, another at each flight of stairs, with a sufficient number of men on the outside to insure safety from all human mischief.

While this was being arranged, Chief McAleney and John Prince, with Gerald Quayle for company, made a tour of the

establishment, to guard against the bare possibility of fire having won a secret foothold by way of roof or windows.

Nothing of the sort was discovered, however, and with experienced policemen on duty on each and every floor, there was no likelihood of a fire breaking forth without being nipped in the bud.

Not until this was done, and he had assured himself that the Department had the fire at the Dussing building fully under control, did Gerald Quayle feel at liberty to desert the spot where so much of the family wealth was stored, even to hurry home to assure his father, head of the firm of Quayle & Co., that all was well with their house.

But it was not until the young man had actually gone away, that the Insurance Special uttered the words which had for fully an hour hung at the tip of his tongue.

He was with the two chiefs, still, and to them his words were addressed, very quietly, yet with serious earnestness, readily recognized.

"I'd like a chance to say a few words to both of you, gentlemen, in private, if you will grant me the time. Will you, then?"

"On what subject, Prince?" bluntly asked Chief McAleney.

"Fire-bugs. It's just possible others than Richter are worth watching."

CHAPTER V.

PRINCE JOHN, THE SPECIAL.

ORSON McALENEY looked into those eyes for an instant, then turned to the head of the Police Department, no doubt believing he had caught at the correct clue, to say:

"He was the only one who got a fair squint at the interior of the Dussing building, Paulette, after the alarm was given. I reckon—"

"If it is anything official, we can find a better place than this to talk it over, surely," mildly hinted Virgo Paulette. "Are you with me in this, Mr. Prince?"

"So thoroughly that I was about to make pretty much the same suggestion. Only—where can we go?"

"Where would you prefer?"

"Immaterial, so far as I am concerned, my dear sir," with a fleeting smile. "Only, I'm quite a little ways from my own stamping-grounds, and so—you comprehend?"

"And you, Mr. McAleney?"

"Anywhere. Your office, or mine."

"Thanks. Then we'll say my office, at the Central. Will you go with me, Mr. Prince?"

"I'll drive him around, if you don't mind, Paulette," cut in the fire-chief, quickly. "My rig's handy, and I'll be at liberty after a word or two to Flaherty, yonder."

Chief McAleney hustled away to speak to his assistant chief, leaving Prince with the head of police.

Their eyes met, with a certain degree of curiosity in each pair, but the elder man was first to speak:

"You really think there are others who require supervision then?"

"I certainly do, sir," came the prompt reply.

"Any of those visible, at present, for instance? If so, kindly indicate them, and I'll see that they are shadowed from now on."

Prince John flashed a glance around over that still goodly crowd, but if his gaze lingered on any particular face or person, it was too briefly for even the keen-eyed chief to make sure.

"There's no particular rush, I reckon, chief. Morning will do, even if you don't conclude I'm trying my hand at discovering a mare's nest."

"You are the best judge, of course, Mr. Prince. The fire-chief knows how to find my office, and I will be waiting your coming. Until then," and his sentence was finished with a polite bow.

"Lord Chesterfield, down to date!" muttered the Insurance Special as he looked curiously at the chief of police, who was striding swiftly away from the spot. "Soft as satin, mild as new milk, slicker than hot butter! And yet—ugh! Of the two, I'd just a l-e-e-t-l-e rather have Satan himself at my heels, if I was on the cross!"

This reflection cast credit on the shrewd judgment of the Eastern representative, for many a law-breaker had reached the same conclusion through sad experience.

It did not take long for Chief McAleney to arrange matters so that he could safely leave the scene of the fire, and then a word to the waiting Special took Prince to the light rig, and at a lively yet safer rate of speed the two men were spinning along through the night, heading for the main station of the San Francisco police.

McAleney made no attempt to draw the confidence of his companion while on their way to the Central, contenting himself for the most part by letting fall sundry hints concerning the head of police.

To these John Prince paid close attention, for, though he had carried letters of introduction to Virgo Paulette, among others, the two men had as yet seen very little of each other, and it was by no means certain that the chief of police fully understood what business had brought the Special to Frisco.

With the chestnut mare between the shafts, it was not long before their present destination was reached, and five minutes later found the trio cozily seated in the private office of the chief, each with a freshly lighted cigar.

"Just to fairly break the ice, you understand, Paulette?" began the fire-chief, with his off-hand frankness seeming more than ordinarily blunt by force of contrast with that velvety blandness opposite. "And so—this is John Prince, better known in circles like ours, perhaps, as 'Prince John, the Special.'"

"In your department of course, Mr. McAleney?"

"After a manner, yes. And in yours, as well, too."

"It may save a little time if you would just cast an eye over my credentials, Chief Paulette," cut in the younger man, producing a damp-proof package from a snug pocket in his undershirt.

The chief gravely but rapidly looked over the papers submitted, which assured him the bearer was duly authorized to investigate, to arrest with or without a warrant, and wholly worthy a prompt response to any call he might make for aid or assistance in his detective work.

"This does not confine you to fire or insurance cases, then, Mr. Prince?" asked the chief, as he returned the documents.

"No, sir, although I came here under the directions of the Trust, hoping to learn a little more concerning the many fires which have become almost epidemic in Frisco, of late weeks."

"If you can do *that*, sir, you will richly merit the freedom of the city!" exclaimed Paulette, losing a little of his ordinary calm.

"You've tumbled to something: what is it, Prince?" bluntly asked the head of the Fire Department.

"In a moment, sir. As for these papers," which he was deftly putting back into their envelope to conceal as before, "of course they are authentic, but you mustn't think I'm warranting every word they say."

"Because they praise your talents?"

"If you call it that, yes," with a half-abashed smile. "You see, sir, it's something like this: luck's been with me, and I've chanced to blunder on one or two good bits. And so—well, for lack of a man with wider experience than mine, the company picked me out to represent their interests at this end of the line for a time. See?"

"That you need a private horn-blower, who can hold one hand over your vocal trap while exercising his own: that's what I see!" declared the fire-chief, with only half-exaggeration. "Why, Paulette, I can beat that explanation all hollow, and not half-try either!"

"I understand," said the head of the police, with a bow that included both men.

"Mr. Prince won his spurs at Brooklyn, added to them at Jersey City, then fully proved his right to both at Chicago."

Chief McAleney gave an undisguised start at this speech, while John Prince himself showed a slight access of color.

"You know it all, then, Paulette?" exclaimed the fire-fighter.

"If not all, at least this much: that there

are trusts and combinations for as well as against, the law; and that the Insurance League is worthily represented by Prince John, the Special."

"That settles me! Hitch on to the cake-shop and haul it away, Paulette!" gasped Orson McAleney, his amazement by no means entirely feigned. "Is there anything you *don't* know, I wonder?"

"Entirely too many, and, unfortunately, just those points on which I ought to be letter-perfect," came the grave answer, as the chief of police turned to his desk, unlocking a drawer from whence he extracted a small metal case.

This case was provided with a small, oddly-shaped key-hole, and with his other hand Chief Paulette produced a golden tooth-pick, from the onyx top of which a certain pressure shot forth a key to fit.

Sliding one side of the case back after turning the key under cover of his broad palm, the chief slipped forth a cabinet-sized card, one side of which bore a remarkably good likeness of the younger man, while on the reverse side was printed a brief record of his professional exploits.

Prince John flushed warmly as he glanced at both sides of the card, but Chief McAleney was more outspoken in his comments.

"Another new wrinkle! And of your own get-up, too, or I'm ringing the wrong gong! What in time—well, what comes next?"

Virgo Paulette smiled faintly at that resigned tone, but said nothing more until the photograph was replaced with the others, and the oddly contrived case was once more under lock and key.

"The sun do move," according to Brother Jasper, and we guardians of the law have got to move with the rest, or—get left!" smiling dimly at his unwonted lapse into the vernacular.

"When *you* get left, Paulette, where'll the rest of us be?"

A frown chased away the smile, for of all things Virgo Paulette least liked complimentary speeches. McAleney knew as much, but just now he was in earnest, and would not swallow his own words.

"That's all right, old man, but I meant it for Gospel, you understand? We all of us try our level, as in duty bound; but *you*—well, I reckon you was *born* that way, for you just 'get there, Eli!' whether you try or not! And so—that's all, for now!"

Prince John laughed softly, and even Virgo Paulette smiled faintly at this truly characteristic speech. The simple truth was endurable, even if it did savor somewhat of compliment.

"Well, there are more combinations than those inimical to the law, as I said before, so it is not so strange that I, as representing the system at this place, should be kept fairly well posted. For instance, I knew of Mr. Prince's arrival here within ten minutes of his touching Frisco soil.

Quiet as this statement was uttered, it produced an impression which was strong, and scarcely all agreeable to the person who drew it forth.

Prince John was by no means a novice in police or detective work, but this was going a step beyond even his experience, and he had hardly time to tell whether he liked it or not.

There followed a brief silence, broken in the end by Prince.

"Since you are served so well, and kept so thoroughly posted, sir, there's hardly any need of my telling my story, is there?"

"Of course there is, man dear!" impulsively cut in the fire-chief. "I'm no seventh son of a seventh daughter, if Paulette is! And so—out with your bundle, Prince, for I'm hungry as a starving wolf for a bite!"

"My sentiments," gravely declared Paulette, with a bow of thanks toward the other chief. "My sole purpose in what has passed, Mr. Prince, was to prove to you how completely I trusted in you, both as man and as officer of the law. Now—will you kindly oblige us, sir?"

No reasonable man could ask for a neater apology, and with his slightly-ruffled feathers smoothed down the right way, Prince John complied, giving a brief but clear synopsis of his professional experience at Brooklyn and Jersey City.

That experience was confined mainly to an organized band of incendiaries which had many months marked their way by flames and destruction, in more than one instance causing loss of life if not actually including that sacrifice in their nefarious plans.

"It was pretty lively work after I had once picked up the right clue; and I'll be honest enough to admit that that same clue came to me by pure accident, without any credit to my wits," added the Special, with a frank, low laugh.

"You got there, all the same, though!"

"Thanks, awfully," bowing to the blunt fire-chief. "I *did* get there in the end, as you say. And when I managed to catch one of the head fire-bugs in the very act of arranging his fire-traps—what did I find?"

"Proof sufficient to stretch a neck, if I had my wish; but of course that would be too much to hope for!" muttered the fire-chief, scowling ferociously; for of all abominable sinners he did most heartily hate a wretch who would adopt that particular method of crime.

"I found my man all ready to touch match to his fire-trap," added the Special. "I had him so surely foul that I felt I could afford to give him a little more rope, and to complete the evidence against the knave, I let him set the fuse well alight before giving him the collar."

"He slipped you, of course?"

"Well, hardly! I run him in, safely enough, but *that* isn't the particular part which most interests me just now."

"You mean the fire-trap, of course?" quietly asked Chief Paulette.

"I do, and when I tell you it was precisely similar to the one we examined at the Quayle building—overturned lamp of metal, substantial enough to bear witness when the ruins should come under examination for a fire-cause; fuse, powder-ring inside of which lay a big bladder full of benzine, which was to be burst when the powder flashed up from the fuse; when I tell you all this, what need of saying more?"

Both officials were listening closely to the younger man, but each face had its own method of exhibiting what brain was feeling. The fire-chief apparently wore heart on sleeve, but not so with the head of police.

He showed no outward emotion, made no audible ejaculations, but coldly waiting until Prince John was through, almost mildly asked:

"Well, bearing both instances in mind, Mr. Prince, what conclusion do you arrive at?"

"There's only one way left open, to my mind, sir."

"And that is—just what?"

CHAPTER VI.

FIRE-BUGS AND ANARCHISTS.

"A BELIEF that San Francisco has fallen heir to the East and Central divisions, yes," coolly answered the Insurance Special.

"A legacy which we could well spare," gravely said the chief of police, slowly passing a hand over his heavy mustache.

"Could, but can't!" bluntly cut in the fire-chief. "And yet—you haven't reached the main point, I reckon, Prince John?"

"Pretty nearly, I fancy," contributed Paulette, with a keen flash of his blue eyes. "Still, it may save time if we proceed in regular order, making everything clear as we go along. You agree with me, Mr. Prince?"

"I think so, yes. I'm more than willing to tell all I know—"

"The night's too short for so much, dear boy!" expostulated Orson McAleney, with humorous haste in face and voice.

"Thanks, awfully! But what makes more sound than an empty conch-shell?"

"Two of 'em—give me the medal, quick!"

Chief Paulette laughed softly, but there was a frown only a few inches higher up, which told of strong distaste for such idle frivolity.

Prince John saw as much, and wisely regained his former terse earnestness of speech and gravity of demeanor.

"I could show you the printed record, by sending to my room for it, gentlemen," he began, "but I reckon I can save some little time by giving you the gist of the matter, right now."

"I took hold of the case when matters grew so hot over in Brooklyn, you understand, but it was not until at least a portion of the gang had shifted their operations to Jersey City, that I made my first actual strike."

"Where you arrested the chief operator?"

"Yes, sir, thanks to a bit of side-luck which will come one's way at odd spells. As I said before, I caught him in the act, and had proof sufficient to send him over the road for life, it seemed."

"But right isn't might, of course!"

"Not in *this* case, although my man got a term at hard labor; still, that cuts no figure in what I set out to tell you, gentlemen."

"Since you both have seen the sort of infernal machine my men used back East, there's no particular need of telling you just how the trick was turned."

"A building would be rented, a stock of goods put in, either dummy or with the contents of the packing-cases removed on a dark or stormy night. Then—a fire, with total loss!" crisply uttered the fire-chief, catching up the broken thread.

"That will do for a general outline, yes," admitted Prince John. "Of course there were variations, but all amounted to pretty much the same thing in the end."

"The object in using a slow-match, measured for one, two, or more hours of burning, hardly calls for a closer description?"

"Twill take but a few seconds longer, sir, and when the ground has once been thoroughly covered, we need not turn back," gravely suggested Chief Paulette.

"It's easy enough, for that matter, chief. When such a fire broke forth, the owners or renters were to be found conspicuous at a theater public ball, or else forming part of a social assembly at the house of a friend, most likely one of the gang; anything to prove an *alibi* so clear and perfect that no insurance shark could even hope to break down the protection!"

"And it's devils like these the courts turn loose again to ply their thrice accursed arts!" fiercely exploded the fire-chief. "Not intending to cast any reflections *your* way, though, Paulette."

"Thank you," gravely acknowledged the chief of police. "I fancy you have not quite finished, Mr. Prince?"

"Not quite, since you really seem to wish a full schedule. It was a trick of this sort my men calculated on playing, of course, but I only held back until the slow-match was fairly burning, then gave him the collar and run him in."

"I led the search at his home—he lived away from the store, being a bit too high-toned for lodgings over the goods, as the majority of our fire-bugs live—and between his mattresses I found twenty-two more bladders, similar to the one I had captured at the store, only lacking the benzine filling as yet."

"Well, my man stood a good bit of tight pinching before he could be coaxed to squeal; but our chief was a past master in the art of running a 'sweat-box,' and in the end we had all the milk that coconut contained."

"He gave names, dates, places, passwords and all the secrets of the organization. He told us so much that a goodly portion of it was morally bound to prove false; but so much of it was afterward substantiated that I imagine it had much to do with his short term in prison."

"Pardoned out, of course!"

"Pardoned out, yes, but only to fall under the avenging knives of the men whom he had betrayed to the police," gravely said the Special.

"Pity all fire-bugs couldn't meet with the same fate, too!"

"This gang was something more than mere incendiaries, unless I am mistaken," mildly said the chief of police. "How far am I wrong, Mr. Prince?"

"Not wrong at all, sir," came the swift answer. "I fear all this is but second-hand news to your ears, chief?"

"Then talk to *my* ears, Prince," cut in the irrepressible fire-chief. "I'll listen for us both, and do you full honor in that way, even if I can't put on quite so many frills and scallops!"

"All right, since there's no other way to

keep peace in the family! And so—this gang proved to be even worse anarchists than they were fire-bugs, and though they kept tolerably quiet for a short time, all who escaped arrest fleeing from Brooklyn and Jersey City, the same hasty outfit afterward broke surface in Chicago.

(Not the Haymarket outfit, be it borne in mind, reader. *That* diabolical outrage lay as yet unsuspected in the womb of the future.)

"In the Lake City the gang showed itself in its truer colors, and was quickly a hotbed of seething, poisonous anarchy, where all things vile and evil were preached almost without a pretense at concealment or disguise.

"Then, too, fires which were almost surely planned solely to defraud the insurance companies, began to grow more and more frequent, and the result was that I had a commission to go to Chicago, and do the best I could to get at the bottom facts of the matter."

"You succeeded, as the records show."

"I had my share of good luck, yes," admitted the Special, modestly. "Any other man would have been just as successful; however, with the material I had to work upon."

"You mean that you recognized some of the Eastern contingent, of course, Mr. Prince?"

"Just so, sir. I found three of my Jersey friends filling positions well within the innermost circle of the combination, and with so much to start on, the rest had to come easy—just *had to*, you must see?"

"When you gave the command—precisely."

Prince John frowned a bit, for this persistent flattery was beginning to cloy, administered adroitly though he had to confess it was. He felt that if it lasted much longer, he would begin to hate this bland, velvet-voiced official.

"That's all right, sir. I did what I deemed my simple duty, and ask for neither praise nor censure. And—it isn't so much the men I arrested, as the men I *didn't* arrest, that I want to talk about just now."

"As you will, Mr. Prince. Pray proceed."

"Thanks. As I stated, I found the company more anarchistic than plain fire-bugs, in Chicago. I found them advocating the general overturning of all law and order, all things established and—But you gentlemen both know the balderdash such snarling curs are wont to advocate."

"As witness our sand-lot orators," grimly commented Chief McAleney, with a wry grimace. "Right there is the only flaw in your armor, Paulette! If you would only squelch that gang, until—"

"Each item in its proper time and place, Mr. McAleney. You were on the point of saying, Mr. Prince?"

"That I'm feeling a vast deal more interest in one of the men I didn't arrest in Chicago, than in those I did."

"Which man you now find is in this city, I believe, sir?"

"More than one of them, unless my eyes have gone back on me, chief," came the quick answer. "But taking them one at a time, the fellow who owned the store which was burnt out to-night—"

"You mean Bernard Dussing?"

"If that's his present choice of names, yes. I saw him, after his wife thanked me for saving her kid. I seldom forget a face, and *his* is one easily recalled."

"Dussing belonged to the Chicago gang, then?"

"And to the Eastern gang before that time, which will explain why I hinted that there might be others besides Herman Richter nigh who would bear a bit of quiet watching."

"Then you know nothing concerning the bookkeeper, Mr. Prince?"

"I know that there was a young German man named Richter mixed up with the Chicago anarchists," slowly admitted the Special.

"Was it our man, do you think?" asked Chief McAleney, with strong interest in face and in voice, before the head of police could speak.

"I can't say as to that, of course, until

after I've had a fair look at this bookkeeper's face."

"You would recognize him, then, if he proved to be the Chicago man?"

"Among a thousand, sir," was the assured response.

"Good enough! You shall have that opportunity with the coming day, unless Herman Richter has jumped town before that fire alarm sounded. He will be on hand when wanted, otherwise. And—you will both join me at Bantry Quayle's office, in the morning, gentlemen?"

As he asked this question, Chief Paulette rose to his feet as if to hint that it was time to terminate that consultation.

Chief McAleney was swift to declare his purpose of being at the rendezvous on time, and Prince John added a like assurance. But then he gravely added:

"Please don't misunderstand me, gentlemen. I repeat: there was a man named Richter mixed up with the Chicago anarchists, but that is the very worst I can say about him. He was not implicated in the plots of the fire-bugs, and, so far as I know, was entirely free from all guilt."

"Isn't it bad enough to be one of those devilish anarchists?" the fire-chief growlingly demanded.

"Bad enough, surely, yet hardly a hanging matter, according to the law of America," smilingly retorted the Special.

"More shame to the American statutes, then! Come, let's go; I'm beginning to yawn, and that is another criminal offense—in certain eyes polite—*ahem!*"

Chief Paulette smiled mildly at this half-spiteful fling, then as politely bowed his visitors forth from the office, gently reminding them of the meeting which was to be held in the morning.

"Well, what do you think of him, anyway, Prince?" asked Orson McAleney, after turning his rig over to a policeman with directions where to dispose of it, explaining the action by declaring he would walk with the Insurance Special as far as the hotel where Prince lodged.

"One I'd certainly rather have as a friend than an enemy; but if I was given the choice between the last and daily company with Chief Paulette—excuse me!"

McAleney broke into a low but hearty laugh at the shrug and gesture which bore these words company; but then he said in frank tones:

"A whiter man never drew the breath of life, Prince. A bit odd in his manners, perhaps, but the longer you know him, the better you'll like Virgo Paulette. And—well, I'm a sort of rough-and-tough dark-alley my own self, as perhaps you've seen enough to guess, but—well, I'd risk my life every hour in the day if I couldn't save that same man's life any easier!"

Prince John had formed a very favorable opinion of the fire-chief from what he had seen of McAleney since his arrival at San Francisco, and this hearty testimony in favor of the odd-mannered chief of police induced him to withhold the judgment he was on the point of shaping.

Walking leisurely, arm in arm, neither feeling in any particular hurry to reach their present destination, the now good friends in low tones talked over the happenings of that night, some of which were destined to so entirely alter the course of life's current.

Neither man thought of deadly peril menacing them, as why should they? Yet such peril was near—so near, in fact, that just as they were passing the mouth of an unlighted alley, a red spark shot swiftly through the air, to strike with considerable force against the breast of Prince John! Then—a loud explosion came which caused the neighboring houses to tremble, and those two men were flattened to the jarring earth as though smitten down by the resistless hand of some giant.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOMB-THROWER.

JUST across the street from the station where Chief Virgo Paulette had his office, and in front of which stood the rig of the fire-chief, the dark-clad figure of a man was leaning in a slouching attitude against the wall; but when the friends came forth, he quickly straightened up, to listen with al-

most breathless attention to the words which Orson McAleney let fall.

When the buggy moved away in charge of an officer, and the two men began their leisurely walk toward the hotel where Prince John had a room, this dark-clad figure took the same course, only keeping to the opposite side of the street and a little to the rear.

Where circumstances favored him—where the night-shadows lay deepest, or there was a space of unlighted street—this human shadow stole noiselessly nigher the two friends, listening to their low talk, himself unsuspected because of his very audacity; but as soon as he had picked up sufficient to make their destination clear to his mind, he altered his own course to suit.

Turning the next corner, he broke into a swift run, his feet giving out no louder sound than if shod with velvet, his movements covered by the dense shadows cast clear across the street by those tall buildings.

When midway the block, he ran quickly across the street, pausing for a keen look to right and to left before entering the alley-mouth, there showing dark and indistinct.

Crouching down close against the wall of the building on the side of the alley opposite that from which his human game was leisurely approaching, the shadow peered forth to measure the distance which yet remained to be covered, then drew back, turning his body into a shield behind which he quickened a tiny blaze with his breath.

One more eager glance down the street, then a short fuse was touched to that miniature flame, and with curving palms covering over those viciously spitting sparks, the bomb-thrower waited for his human game with a degree of coolness fairly devilish.

Then—with a low, venomous curse in a foreign tongue, the bomb was hurled straight at those two men, and ducking his head, with arms upturned and curving to protect his own head from ought which might be hurled his way by the explosion, the anarchist fled at top speed through the dark alley.

The explosion came, almost instantly, and despite his swift flight, the concussion of air was so great as to stagger the bomb-thrower; he fell forward on hands and knees, but as quickly rallied, giving a gurgling sound of vicious triumph as he did so.

A few words followed that smothered cry, but they, like those which had passed his bearded lips before, were couched in a foreign patois.

No cry nor scream came from the scene of explosion, but the bomb-thrower did not stop to wonder why: unless Satan had played him strangely false, his work had been too thoroughly done for that!

Still, the dynamiter knew that the alarm must quickly spread, for the echoes of that explosion would ring from center to circumference of San Francisco, and the peace-guardians would hurry to that spot, to find—what?

Not the prime author of that horrible crime certainly!

His actions proved plainly enough that the bomb-thrower was reasoning along these lines, for in place of listening to bear the first alarm given, or even to make sure that no one was already on his track, he rushed deeper into the alley, but when hardly one-quarter way through to the other street, he turned to the right, nimbly flinging himself over a low, tight-board fence, pausing for a moment to bend an ear in listening, "beard on shoulder."

Barely long enough to catch the sounds of loud, excited cries coming from that direction, mingling with the swift rapping of a night-club against the curbstone, and the shrill, thrilling call from a police whistle.

Another fiercely exultant chuckle, then the bomb-thrower pressed on in his flight, seemingly gifted with the eyes of a cat to carry him so swiftly and so silently through that narrow, cluttered-up back-yard.

A division fence ran squarely up against the building, and climbing upon this, the dynamiter slipped over the square-topped post at the end, then finding himself in a narrow passage-way between the two buildings.

This space was too narrow for a man to walk after the ordinary fashion, but by turning sideways and edging along in that

manner, the anarchist quickly won his way to the end of the buildings nearest the street.

Here he paused, fairly holding his breath as he heard footfalls and excited voices in passing; but then, springing up and catching the top of the narrow boarding which closed that passage, the exercise of a little athletic skill sent the bomb-thrower safely to the pave, where there was nothing to connect him with that dastardly outrage on the other street.

His gaze was turned in that direction for a moment or two, for excited voices were distinctly to be heard, and then came the rapid rumble of wheels as a vehicle of some description dashed along through the night.

"An ambulance, is it?" muttered the bomb-thrower, this time in hardly accented English, showing his white teeth as he hurried past a lighted window. "Hearse, rather! And a crossing-sweeper to gather the bits!"

Laughing in his beard, the dynamiter hurried on his way, which took him further from the scene of that explosion, so confident was he that his devilish work had been thoroughly done.

He seemed in haste to reach the destination he had in mind, but not so eager that he was forgetful of common prudence. Nothing in his outer man would attract unwelcome suspicion, yet space was rapidly covered, and his infernal excitement had hardly time to begin cooling off before that destination was reached.

It was in a by no means aristocratic section of the Golden Gate City, and admission was granted the dynamiter only after his dingy knuckles had sounded a peculiar signal against that closed door.

The barrier opened, at length, but barely wide enough to permit head and hand to enter, both of which members had to play a further part before the stout chain was unhooked and the guardian permitted an entrance in full.

Although still in complete darkness—for the door was immediately closed behind him—the dynamiter was clearly at home, for he hurried along to another door, hand falling on knob as though guided by pure instinct.

Turning this, pushing back the door, the bomb-thrower crossed a threshold and entered a fairly spacious room, where three men were seated at beer and tobacco, now in silence as they looked to see who was the later arrival.

"Only you? None others, yet?" brusquely asked the bomb-thrower, as though he had counted on finding a much more extensive gathering at this rendezvous.

"All, with Johann Freund, who gave you entrance, Petroff," answered one of the beer-drinkers, promptly enough. "And you—what word, Ivan?"

"Good! better! Best!" vigorously uttered the Russian, gesticulating after a manner to match his speech. "Have your ears not told you, my brothers? Have they not heard the voice of death—no?"

"Voice of the devil—no!" grunted another of the little party, yet rousing himself with an expression of dawning interest. "Is it anything more than empty sound, Petroff?"

The bomb-thrower reached across to grasp the last speaker's metal mug, draining its contents at a single mighty gulp, then giving a wry grimace as he flicked the froth from his huge mustaches with a grimy forefinger before saying:

"Bah! swill for swine, Anton Marx! Vodka—brandy—even the whisky of this country; but beer—milk for babes, unless you like the first description better!"

"Beer for men, rather," gruffly retorted the German. "You—that is enough excuse, Petroff, for your not liking beer; so?"

Three against one, for the fourth was a son of Italy, and held himself neutral for the time being, yet showing white teeth through a jetty mustache as his beady little eyes flashed from face to face as the laugh passed on.

"If it is the badge of manhood to swill sour beer, brothers, what then is it to do the work this right hand has done?" cried Ivan Petroff, rising to his feet and lifting the member named, smiling upon it as though about to say his prayers to it as a god.

And, whatever his inner being, outwardly the Russian anarchist and dynamiter looked a god-like man.

Tall, perfectly formed, graceful in movement, his hand and face came pretty near filling the painters' ideal of a Messiah, save that hair and beard were somewhat too heavy; the former falling in yellow waves to his shoulders, the latter rippling down over his broad, full chest, fine and silken, glossy and free from tangles, if not quite as clean as a critic might have preferred.

"Anything grander than stealing a better man's beer?"

Giving a short, harsh laugh that matched oddly with his really benevolent face, Ivan Petroff dramatically detailed his recent exploit, acting it all out up to the instant of hurling that fire-spitting missile full at the breast of their hated foe.

"Then—c-r-rash! Ha! here, there, yonder—br-r-rgh! A broom! A hoe! A pan to catch the fragments, now! Bah! Rather a pack of hungry curs to growl and snarl and fight over the food which this good right hand has scattered for them!"

Flinging out both hands as he gave this for a climax, Ivan Petroff dropped back into a chair, leaning his head over until his face was turned toward the ceiling, then laughing long, loud and heartily.

As for the others, silence reigned.

That narrative had been so graphic, so fully illustrated, that none of them could even for a moment doubt the perfect truth of the speaker. One and all hated Fire-chief McAleney, not to mention this latest arrival whose advent had promised to give them so much trouble; but they were hardly ready to agree with the desperate Russian, as yet.

"What! not even one word by the way of congratulation?" he suddenly cried, noticing that unexpected silence. "Is it not clear enough, my good friends? A bomb—pouf! Where is he, this devil of a human hound? Ha! ask the walls, the streets, the—go read the red signature of Ivan Petroff, the Bomb Thrower, then!"

"It is too red—too plainly read," gravely declared the son of Italy, shaking his head in disapproval. Killing? That is good—that is necessary. The knife is best, but the bullet—well, that, too, tells no tales when rightly directed and surely sent home. But dynamite—pouf! That is it: too much noise!"

"And just now, when too many eyes are turned our way!"

"Right! Petroff was ever a fool. He don't like beer, although he will steal it, times," grunted Anton Marx, as his turn came round.

Smiling like a canonized saint, Ivan Petroff listened to the men whom he called brethren, and when each had had his say, the dynamiter spoke in defense of his atrocious crime.

"Knife—pistol—bah! Toys for rash children, nothing more. I am a man: I use the dynamite, manhood's weapon against tyrants, oppressors, spies, hounds of an arbitrary law! And now—listen, my brothers!"

"I was at the fire, this night, and while there, I caught words—I gathered enough to prove real our wildest suspicions; that the devils of law are preparing to pounce upon and forever destroy our organization! Yes!" as the others gave a stir and low murmurs: "It is heaven's own truth I am trying to make you see, my brothers!"

"I caught enough this night to be sure they are on our scent, and mean to hunt us down without mercy. Who? That devil in human shape men call Prince John!"

"You know him? He is the one, then, Petroff?"

"I knew him in Chicago, before—but you have heard all that, my brothers. I knew him still further back, further East, and I never knew him when his brain was not scheming against our honest interests, when his ready hand was not turned against our rights!"

"And now—"

"And now you are holding up your hands in holy horror at thought of the just retribution he has so richly merited for lo! these many years! And now—was it not time for a man to act?"

The face of a god, the voice of a fanatic, the words of one lost to all things pure, noble, honest!

Speaking so swiftly, so earnestly, Ivan

Petroff did not catch the signal which sent that night's doorkeeper from the room, to give another one of that lawless band admission, just as the bomb-thrower had "worked his way in."

The new-comer paused at the door through those concluding sentences, a bitter smile curling his thin lips and his dark eyes gleaming with a snaky brightness. But now he stepped forward, to tap the dynamiter gently on a shoulder before saying:

"Are you drunken, Ivan Petroff, or simply lying for sport?"

The bomb-thrower turned swiftly, his brows gathering, but instantly recognizing the new-comer, he ejaculated:

"You, Niccoli Vivaldi?"

"I, Niccoli Vivaldi," bowed the other, again showing pointed teeth through his thin, scanty beard as his thin lips curled back and away, his snake-like head giving him an appearance fairly repulsive just then.

"And you said—what did you say, brother?"

"'Twas not so much my saying, as yours, Ivan Petroff. This wonderful exploit of yours—how does it run, good brother?"

Flushing a bit at that mocking address, yet holding his temper well under control, Ivan Petroff curtly repeated what he had told the others of that unholy league against law and order.

"Only for what I knew against that devil of a detective, I might still have held my hand, waiting for the master to give sign or say word," the bomb-thrower added, swiftly. "But when I knew all that lay at yon demon's door! When I knew that he was surely on our trail, trying to run us down to death or life imprisonment—how could I hold my hand?"

"And you killed them both with your wonderful bomb, Petroff?"

"I killed them both with my wonderful bomb—yes! Why not? How long would we be safe with that human hound on our track? While he lived, no honest man could have a show!"

"And you still believe you killed Prince John? Bah!" with a bitter laugh, then adding: "He is still alive, Ivan Petroff!"

"What? Still alive? It is not—You lie, Vivaldi!"

"You lie—under a mistake, Ivan Petroff," came the icy retort. "I saw Prince John after that bomb exploded, and he is without a scratch!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE EXPLOSION,

PRINCE JOHN received that bomb, fairly against his right breast, but though nothing could have been further from his thoughts than such a dastardly attempt at assassination as this, his brain and wits were all in good working order, and as he caught just a glimpse of that fire-spitting fuse, the instant that missile struck him, his hand caught the bomb and hurled it out into the street.

There was no time for either warning or reasoning, for Ivan Petroff was no novice at bomb-throwing, and had made his calculations closely.

Acting almost entirely through instinct, the Insurance Special cast away the missile, then grappled with his companion, jerking him flat to the pavement alongside himself.

Swiftly as all this was accomplished, the two men were yet in the act of falling when the bomb exploded with terrific force, dashing them against the building next the alley, deafening and partially stunning them both.

Hence it came to pass that Ivan Petroff fled with a certainty of mind that his awful work was thoroughly accomplished; yet nothing worse than an ugly shock and sundry slight cuts and bruises inflicted by the lesser debris torn up by that explosion, came to either Prince John or Fire-chief McAleney.

The neighboring buildings seemed shaken almost to their fall, while a tremor ran through at least that section of the earth.

The street was torn up, a great basin left to mark the spot where the bomb had fallen. Glass was broken for a square around, and stones torn up from the street rebounded like hail from the adjacent houses.

Chief McAleney lay as he had fallen, his head having come into violent contact with the wall, but almost instantly Prince John was on his feet, one hand jerking forth a revolver while its mate wiped dirt and dust away from his half-blinded eyes.

The cloud of dust and smoke was curling all around, but if the bomb-thrower had ventured forth to inspect his dastardly work, he surely would have met with a hot reception; for, just then, the detective felt that his friend had been killed, either by the bomb itself, or by some of those flinty missiles wrenched from the street.

Only pausing long enough to make sure no enemy was visible on pave or in street, and knowing that the anarchistic missile had come from out the alley-mouth, Prince John sprung into that gloomy passage, rushing along at reckless speed, yet with revolver ready for use the instant he should catch sight of a human figure.

But comparatively brief as had been that indecision after the explosion, it had lasted long enough for the dynamiter to effect his escape from the alley; and seeing, hearing nothing to guide his aim or his grip, Prince John paused short to listen.

He caught the first sounds telling of the alarm being taken by the police or citizens, and knowing what long odds there now was against his overtaking the bomb-thrower, the detective abandoned pursuit.

"For now—only for to-night, mind ye!" he muttered, sternly, as if apologizing for so readily abandoning the quest. "Later on, but now—good, so far!"

Those final words sent Prince John swiftly back on his own tracks for they found birth in the choked, dazed cry from the lips of Chief McAleney, who had just rallied from that heavy shock.

"Only I, pardner!" hastily said the detective, as he sprung forth from the alley-mouth, instantly seeing the officer fumbling for a weapon with temporarily unnerved hand. "Prince—don't shoot, man!"

"What was it? Who—wasn't a comet falling?" stammered the still dazed man, leaning dizzily against that wall for support.

"Easy, McAleney!" muttered John Prince as there came the rapid rush of heavy feet. "Brace up and let me do the talking until you've got on a level keel once more, for—friends, and honest men, officer!"

With one hand gripping an arm of the fire-chief as an additional warning, Prince John hailed the coming policeman thus, as he knew they were sighted by the suspicious guardian of the night.

"Who are you, and what's all this racket about?" harshly challenged the officer, night club in one hand and pistol in the other.

"Fire-chief McAleney, for one, and none of our election, as for the bomb explosion, my dear sir," promptly answered the Insurance Special.

In a hasty whisper he added for his companion's benefit:

"On guard, McAleney! If you suspect aught, don't let on until we've had time to match notes!"

"It's all right, Freeman," declared the fire-chief, rallying his wits sufficiently to recognize the policeman. "You know me, and this is a friend of mine, who—don't rush too fast, gentlemen!" he added, sternly, as a number of others came hurrying on the scene.

Among them were a couple of policemen, but the rest were citizens and naturally intensely excited by that unusual happening.

A light was speedily procured, and with its rays to assist, there was less difficulty in comprehending just what had taken place.

That excavation in the middle of the street spoke for itself, and as curious eyes spied out dents and holes made in the adjacent buildings by the stones thus converted into missiles, the full power of that exploded bomb was realized.

Prince John was very fortunate in having a companion so well and favorably known as Orson McAleney, else he might have found it less easy to explain his part in that dramatic incident; as it was, he told a very simple, honest tale, sticking close to the line of truth, but taking care to know nothing which could possibly explain or excuse such a dastardly attempt at assassination.

The fire-chief quickly took the cue thus

provided, and he was just as unable to cast aught of light upon the mysterious affair.

"Still, I reckon it comes of my belonging to the Fire Department," was as far as he could suggest. "I reckon 'twas all meant for my benefit, and this gentleman being along was his bad luck!"

"It's an infernal shame, look at it how you may," sternly declared one of those drawn to the spot by that far-sounding explosion. "If the Police Department—"

"Easy, Mr. Featherkyl!"

"That's all right, for you, McAleney," bluntly said the man, moving a little nearer the two friends, and flashing a keen glance into the grimy face of the Insurance Detective by the light of the lantern, which happened to turn that way just then. "As for me, I say—"

"Why say it at all, Featherkyl?"

"Why not say it, rather? If talking would do any good—"

"Which you are hardly a believer in," laughingly cut in the chief.

"It's part of my profession, all the same," declared the gentleman, in a better humored tone. "And, as a lawyer, mind you, I'm talking with my eyes fully open. And so—I say it over again, and say it *hard*: it is an infernal shame to us all, and an eternal disgrace to the Police Department, from Chief Virgo Paulette down to his latest appointment!"

"You are too rough on the force, Mr. Featherkyl."

"Am I, then? Not half rough enough, or there'd be a change through very shame!" vigorously declared the lawyer, his strong, almost handsome face looking very earnest as the light of the lantern was cast upon it by the officer in whose grip it was held.

"If you mean this explosion—"

"I *do* mean this, among countless other outrages, hardly less audacious," interrupted the lawyer. "You may say that the force has not had a chance—has not had time to look into this matter; but how about the others?"

"You mean?"

"A list long as your arm—and that's no trifle, chief," with a low laugh as his tones grew less stern and harsh. "I'm a fool for taking it so near to heart, and I know all that, McAleney; but—my home is here in Frisco, and I'd dearly like to look all the world full in the eye while declaring I'm proud of my home! But—that'd be a lie, and the whole world knows it full as well as I do—worse luck!"

"We do the best we can, and what more can you ask, Featherkyl?"

"Leave yourself out, McAleney. I'm not bucking against your particular Department, for I know you are trying to play your full part, even if the sinners *do* get a bit the start of you, sometimes!"

"What I'm kicking against now, is the force under Virgo Paulette, with the chief himself as main target. With the power given him, he certainly ought to do *something* worth putting on record. Instead, even so good a friend to him as *you* are, McAleney, can't deny that he is letting anarchists, fire-bugs, dynamiters and blather-skites in general, fairly run the town!"

"Well, I still hold that Chief Paulette and his force is doing all that can reasonably be expected of him," gravely asserted the fire-chief, bowing to the irate lawyer, then moving away from the scene of the explosion in company with the Insurance Detective.

"Who is that rough talker, anyway, chief?" asked Prince John, when they had drawn fairly clear of that still interested assembly.

"Noble Featherkyl by name, lawyer by training, and you've had a fair sample of his chatter when he gets a move on," curtly answered the officer. "He don't like Paulette for a cent!"

"So I should imagine from his talk," with a brief, dry chuckle. "I had time enough for a pretty fair look, too, and he is hardly a mouth-organ, either."

"No. He's all right, barring that one fault of too blunt speech. And then, too, you must remember that he belongs to the other side in politics."

"A lawyer, eh?" musingly repeated the Special, after a brief silence, during which the two friends kept on their way to the hotel at which the Eastern man put up for

the time being. "And a bit of a politician, of course?"

"Lawyer, politician, sporting-man, hail-fellow-well-met, just about sums up Noble Featherkyl," said the elder man. "You seem to take a deep interest in him, Prince?"

"Well, he talked out rather bolder than most men would, with police all about him, and so—I say, McAleney?"

"Keep on saying it, Prince."

"It mightn't be such a bad idea to put this Noble Featherkyl's name on the ticket at the coming election. Say as City Attorney—eh? Being a lawyer, that would fit his size best. And then—well, if his actions while in office would only equal his words while out of it, San Francisco would be ready for the last trump—don't you think?"

"I can see only one objection to your scheme, Prince."

"And that is—what?"

"Featherkyl belongs to the wrong party, and would stand just about as much show of election as the clawless cat in—well!"

John Prince joined in the pleasant chuckle and then the two men slackened their pace until they very nearly came to a standstill, for the hotel loomed up in front of them, and still a few words remained to be spoken on either side, late though the hour now was.

"Don't forget that Paulette will be expecting us in the morning, Prince. You'll be on hand? Or—shall I call for you?"

"Suit yourself as to that, McAleney. Reckon I can find the place without any trouble."

"I'll call, then. Wait for me, please. Now—sleep hearty!"

"Same to you—thanks."

With a firm hand-grip in parting, each went his own way.

CHAPTER IX.

ACCUSED AND ACCUSER.

ALTHOUGH getting between sheets at such a late hour, Prince John was no later in leaving his bed than usual, being somewhat of an early bird by inclination as by training.

He was among the earliest to visit the morning table, and then, knowing he would have an hour or so before time to expect Chief McAleney on his way to keep the appointment made by Virgo Paulette, the Insurance Detective left his hotel and strolled off for a little constitutional.

Although nothing out of the ordinary run occurred to him during that walk, Prince John, thanks to his limited knowledge of the city streets, lost more time than he had calculated on, and when he finally found his way back to the hotel, it was only to learn that the fire-chief had called for him, and learning from the clerk on duty that Mr. Prince had stepped out, passed away himself.

A glance at the clock told the detective what this meant, and knowing that he could hardly avoid keeping others waiting now, he lessened that risk as much as possible by pressing one of the hotel bell-boys into service as guide.

Thus it happened that the usually prompt detective found those more deeply interested in the happenings of the past night, ready gathered at the office of Quayle & Co., only awaiting his arrival to enter upon the examination which all felt could not be delayed longer.

Prince John, sending the boy-guide back with a shining coin in his palm, briefly apologized for the delay, and then was introduced to such of the party as he had not met on the night last past.

These were only two in number, leaving out the policemen who still held charge of the establishment; and at first glance Prince John placed them both, although this was his first sight of the elder gentleman.

"Better late than never, my dear sir," declared Chief Paulette in accepting that apology. "We have lost but little time, however, and can easily make that up by—excuse me, please," bowing again as he turned so as to leave the two face to face.

"Mr. Prince, permit me to introduce you to Mr. Quayle, head of this firm; Mr. Quayle, this is a friend of ours from the Eastern slope, interested in insurance matters."

"Your servant, sir," said Bantry Quayle, with a stiff bow, his faint yet unmistakable accent proclaiming him a true son of the Emerald Isle. "And now, sir," turning sharply upon the head of police, his eyes fairly aglow and his strong face working angrily, "enough of this infernal mystery, sir!"

"What has happened here? How is it I find my property in charge of the police? Who has authority to—the devil and all, sir! Will you ever speak out, then?"

Stronger grew that accent, and with each passing moment Bantry Quayle grew more and more Milesian in looks and actions. For years he had not been so thoroughly wrought up in mind as now, and though a true citizen of America for more than a generation, the Celtic blood underlay it all.

The merchant was very tall, very thin of flesh and slender of build. Yet it took but a passing glance to decide that Bantry Quayle was what an insurance agent would declare "a good risk," for that thinness was constitutional, and despite those snowy white hairs of head and face—for the merchant wore a very military-like mustache and whiskers—he looked the very perfection of hale and sound old age.

His eyes were black as jet, large and brilliant, filled now with the light of battle as he stood before the gravely smiling chief of police.

"One moment, please," gently apologized Virgo Paulette, his eyes glancing from those of the Insurance Special to the fifth member of the little assembly, then back again. "Mr. Richter, permit me to—this is Herman Richter, head bookkeeper, of this firm."

Prince John had already been favoring that person with his searching glances, but not until their names were thus pronounced in connection, did Herman Richter lift his eyes to a level with the detective's face.

As he did this, his own face showed pale and uneasy—almost betraying fear, the watchful officer decided as he took silent notes.

Prince John bowed in silent acknowledgment of that introduction, but he did not extend the customary hand as a seal. Nor did Mr. Richter make any such offer, even retreating a pace as he bowed low in turn.

The head bookkeeper was fully up to the average height, with maybe a trifle added for good measure. His figure was more than good; strong, justly proportioned for everyday life or extraordinary occasions, as might come before him; the figure of a healthy, well-developed man of some seven or eight-and-twenty years.

There was something distinctively German about the bookkeeper. It may have been his fair complexion, his blue eyes, his blonde hair and pair of mustaches trained with a military curl at the ends; or it may have been suggested by that student-like scar which marked both temple and left cheekbone; the slash of a "schlager."

As for the rest, Richter's face looked lined with anxiety—it surely could not be fear?—and there were leaden circles around his eyes, the balls themselves showing red veins so thickly that the organs seemed highly inflamed.

In addition to all this, his attire, of good if rather flashy materials, was disordered and soiled in spots, just what might have been expected in one rallying from a protracted debauch, caught before he had time or opportunity for renovating his person.

Not far from Richter's left hand stood Gerald Quayle, pale but stern, evidently meaning to show no mercy to the erring if the final decision was left with him.

Opposite, smiling faintly as his keen eyes took notes of all, stood Orson McAleney, head of the Fire Department.

"For the last time of asking, gentlemen!" again broke forth Bantry Quayle in stern, harsh tones. "What has gone wrong here? By what right am I kept from passing through my own property? Right, is it?" with a short, hard laugh. "Sure, then, 'tis no right at all that's left me, I'm thinking!"

"It's all right, father," declared Gerald, in response to the slight nod from Chief Paulette. "Something turned wrong last night, and—I promise that you'll be satisfied in the end, sir."

"And I say the same, Mr. Quayle, only—

please allow me another moment or two of grace?"

"'Tis precious little I've got to say about it either way, I'm thinking, faith!" muttered the merchant, but yielding to the touch of his son's hand.

Chief Paulette turned to Herman Richter, face grave as his tones.

"You room here I believe, Mr. Richter?"

The bookkeeper bowed assent, those slightly twitching muscles telling why he preferred a silent answer to using his tongue, just then.

"Did you retire as usual, last night, may I ask, Mr. Richter?"

"No, sir. I didn't—I did not return after taking my supper."

Promptly enough as to words, but with a slight hitch, and an unusual indistinctness of voice. And, at the same time, the bookkeeper turned his face a little more away from the cool keen gaze of the Insurance Detective.

"You did not sleep in your chamber, on the third floor, then?" persisted the chief of police. "Did any one else sleep there, with your knowledge or permission, sir?"

A hot flush leaped into the pale face, and the bookkeeper's head went back a bit as through indignation, while he spoke in turn:

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"Excuse me, please," with suspicious mildness. "I surely thought I was speaking distinctly, but—did any one else sleep in your chamber, last night, with your permission, Mr. Richter?"

"Of course I gave no such permission, sir, and—by what right do you assume to ask such questions, anyway?"

Chief Paulette turned away without attempting to answer this insolent question, gravely addressing the merchant instead:

"Perhaps you will enlighten me, Mr. Quayle; how long has your head bookkeeper lodged here, and why did he make such a choice?"

"For a year past, sir, and as for seasons—"

"To lessen the bare cost of living, since you insist on prying into private matters with which you have no earthly concern, sir," coldly cut in the bookkeeper himself.

"Thanks," with a formal bow to both, in turn. "If in your chamber, even though sleeping, then, you would have heard and responded to the alarm of fire, last night, Mr. Richter?"

"Of course, but I repeat: I was not in my room, last night."

"May I ask where you were, then?"

Now the irritation against which Herman Richter had been fighting so hard and so long fairly broke bonds, and he angrily exploded:

"By what law, what right, sir? Who gave you authority to badger me after this fashion? Am I a dog? Am I a criminal? Have I committed any foul deed which—"

Chief Paulette, losing all his satiny blandness, swiftly cut in at this point, his tones cold and hard as his eyes were piercing.

"That is the exact point in question, Richter, and unless you're anxious to have snap-judgment taken against you, your wisest course is to meet us at least halfway."

A hand flew up to that broad, high forehead, and with a dazed, bewildered expression coming over his haggard face, the bookkeeper actually staggered back, glancing from face to face while stammering:

"I don't—I can't—what do you mean, man?"

Hardly consciously on his own part, it may be, Herman Richter was looking at Prince John as those last words crossed his lips; and as he realized how steadily those keen eyes were watching him, how surely they were reading his thoughts, his flush turned to an almost ghastly pallor, as he visibly staggered as he turned away, to encounter the grave, troubled gaze of his employer.

Herman Richter rallied at this, for he could not help feeling that his all was at stake, now. Unless he could hold his own—better death itself than shameful defeat.

"To you I appeal, dear sir!" the bookkeeper cried, huskily yet with almost painful distinctness. "For these dogs—bah! I spit upon them, one and all! But you—hear

me, Mr. Quayle! I swear by the name of—by all that an honest man holds holy, then! I swear that I have done no evil, no sin, no wrong thing that renders me unfit to meet the friendly eyes of an honorable gentleman who— Say that you will still hold trust in my honor, sir?"

Until now Gerald Quayle had stood by, listening in grim silence, yet with the air of one who knows he can settle all by simply parting his lips to let fall the damning truth.

His faint smile turned to a contemptuous sneer at this hardly coherent outburst. What others might have deemed a pathetic if broken cry, to him was but a maudlin plea, silly as it surely must prove false in toto.

Now, as the German fell upon his knees in front of the merchant, his hands clasped and lifted as to a deity, Gerald Quayle stepped forward to almost rudely strike a shoulder of the pleading man with an impatient hand, brusquely speaking:

"Get up, you whining cur! Is it not enough to be branded liar, without inviting the addition of hypocrite, as well?"

Shrinking from that rude contact, yet springing to his feet with a hot flush changing his pallor to scarlet, the bookkeeper hoarsely said:

"You—this from you, Gerald?"

"All this from me, and plenty more, too, you double-faced cur! To see one of your caliber pleading to— Father?"

For Bantry Quayle, driven almost beside himself by these strange words and stranger actions, surged forward, one strong arm sending the German reeling aside, the other hand closing upon Gerald's arm with a force that caused the son to flinch and utter that title.

"Ay, your father, boy! And as your father—what in the name of the foul fiend himself are you trying to get through you, boy?"

That still strong hand gave the young man an almost vicious shake as though to hasten the information demanded, but Gerald Quayle still kept cool enough to glance toward the chief of police before making answer.

Virgo Paulette nodded assent, and then, with a rancor which he made no further effort to even thinly disguise, Gerald cried out:

"The solid truth, father, as you can read for yourself by watching Herman Richter's face when I denounce him as—ha! you firebug!"

With a choking cry the bookkeeper staggered back, his face turning pale as that of one long since dead, while Bantry Quayle swiftly asked:

"Are you turned crazy, Gerald? What do you—what can you mean, then, ye devil, ye?"

"That Herman Richter tried to burn this building and contents, last night!" sternly charged the young man.

CHAPTER X.

PUT TO THE QUESTION.

A BRIEF and breathless silence followed this accusation, but then, like one rallying from a stunning yet stinging stroke, Herman Richter gave vent to a fierce, snarling cry, leaping with curved fingers for the throat of his accuser.

But keen eyes had been taking notes, and ready wits were busily working all the while.

Prince John swiftly sprang between the two young men, one left thrust of his muscular shoulder sending Gerald Quayle staggering back, while his sinewy hands gripped the enraged bookkeeper and held him helpless until the chief of police could exert his authority.

A lifting hand and a sharp whistle brought a couple of stalwart officers into the office, and at a sign from their superior they took charge of Richter, whom Prince John immediately released.

"By what right—"

Chief Paulette sharply tapped the gold badge he wore over his heart, by way of answer, and the accused left that hoarse demand incomplete.

"You stand charged with a serious crime, Mr. Richter," he said, sternly, yet with something milder returning to his voice.

"Wrongfully—I never tried—how could I, after my kind and generous treatment at—*at your hands, Mr. Quayle?*"

"Sure, and it's mighty more like a goose than a quail I'm feeling the now, do ye mind, faith!" exploded the merchant, one hand rumpling up his hair; even as its mate smoothed down his heavy mustache.

"If you will permit us, Mr. Quayle, order shall quickly come out of chaos," mildly spoke the chief of police.

"Let it come, then, and the quicker the better, sir! And—d'ye mind, then? And if it fails to come, it's looking at something that shall go, I am! And go neck and heels all in a heap, at that, faith!"

More and more Irish grew the merchant as his temper mounted past the temperate notch; but Chief Paulette seemed to care little for empty words, and when actions attempt to take their place—well, he would be right there or thereabouts, no doubt!

As though convinced that he could only damage his cause by showing rage or attempting resistance further, Herman Richter stood quietly under charge of the policemen, whose hands had been removed at a quiet signal from Paulette, but who still stood near enough to grasp the prisoner before he could do any one harm in his rage.

Turning that way, Chief Paulette gravely spoke:

"Will you answer my questions, Mr. Richter?"

"That depends," came the sullen answer. "Am I a prisoner, then?"

"Not yet. If at all, depends mainly upon yourself, sir. If innocent of any wrong-doing—"

"He lies like a dog who even dares hint the contrary!"

"Then the easiest as well as quickest way out of the wilderness lies through plain talk, my dear sir," fairly purred the chief. "And so—when were you in your up-stairs chamber last, Mr. Richter?"

"I haven't been there at all, sir!" with a downward glance at his untidy attire. "I was refused permission when—"

"This morning, yes, but I mean before that. When were you inside that room last, please?"

A brief pause as though for reflection, then the accused replied:

"At six, or not far one way or the other from six o'clock, last evening. We closed at half-past five, as usual."

"You are positive as to this time, Mr. Richter?"

"Within ten minutes either way, yes, sir."

"Then you slept out, last night?"

The head bookkeeper bowed, in silence.

"At what hotel, please? You registered, of course?"

"I decline to answer, sir."

"May I ask your reasons for refusing an answer, Mr. Richter?"

"I have none for you, sir. That concerns only myself."

"Still, to clear your record?"

"I have nothing more to say on that point, sir," doggedly repeated the bookkeeper.

There was a brief pause, then Chief Paulette spoke again:

"Let it rest there, since you seem to prefer, Mr. Richter. And now, gentlemen all, suppose we pass up-stairs for a few minutes?"

Acting on his own hook, Prince John stepped swiftly forward and took possession of the accused, slipping a hand through his arm after a matter-of-course fashion which Herman Richter did not see fit to resent in words or in actions.

Prince John did not even glance into that pale face, but he could detect the shiver as of sudden cold which ran through the arm he had taken possession of, and he could feel that strong heart throbbing with a force which must have been as painful as it surely was unnatural.

Gerald Quayle whispered a few words to his father, and the merchant raised no objections to the change which Chief Paulette was engineering.

The policemen bore them company only to the foot of the first flight of stairs, where they remained as though previously instructed.

The elevator had not yet been put in oper-

ation, and it was a matter of time for that ascent to be completed, for, while all things seemed to be coming his way, Virgo Paulette was not a man to rush matters unduly.

Bantry Quayle frowned and clinched a fist at each officer whom he encountered during that trip upward. As they had been left the night before, so it was now; each flight of steps had its uniformed guardian, who gravely saluted their chief as Paulette passed by.

Unlocking the chamber door with a key selected from his own bunch, Chief Paulette stepped over the threshold, followed by the Quayles, father and son, both of whom the astute officer placed to suit his own ideas, before Prince John entered with the accused in charge.

Chief Paulette closed and locked the door, then gave the Insurance Detective a meaning nod, which was instantly obeyed by Prince John turning his companion so that he was squarely fronting that broad table on which still rested that diabolical engine of destruction.

"Did you ever see anything like that before, Herman Richter?" the Special demanded, stepping back a pace, leaving the accused free for the time being.

A start, a stare, then a hoarse, almost suffocating cry burst from the bookkeeper's lips as he saw what was meant; and then his cry turned to harsh, vicious speech as he sprung into action, straight for the throat of the Insurance Detective.

"A lie—a trap, ye devils! I'll never be—"

Any ordinary man would have fared but poorly in the hands of an athletic fellow like this German ex-student, but Prince John did not permit that deadly grip to close upon his person, meeting the assault by a swift movement that foiled even while it conquered.

A writhing foil, a close grapple, a brief struggle—then Herman Richter was tripped from his footing and hurled headlong across the chamber, to fall upon the already rumpled bed.

Prince John followed, as though he formed a portion of that flying mass, and almost before the other could realize the peril, it was at an end, and the detective was drawing up from the bed, where Herman Richter lay half-stunned, steel handcuffs claspings his wrists!

"Glory Moses!" cried Chief McAleney, enthusiastically. "As neat a bit of work as ever— All right, Prince John!"

For one of those strong hands was coming in front of his lips with a silencing gesture, and then the detective turned back to assist his bewildered prisoner in leaving that bed.

"I reckon the gentleman will be amenable to reason, Chief Paulette," Prince John coolly said, a strong hand both guarding and steadying the bookkeeper as Herman Richter came down on his feet once more.

"Thank you, Mr. Prince. How is it, Richter? Shall I call in an officer to take charge again, or will you act in sober reason?"

Pale, shaken, clearly far from being his customary self, Herman Richter nevertheless had received a lesson which apparently stood him in good stead, for he made answer with forced composure, his words trembling with his voice, but his meaning perfectly clear.

"I most humbly crave your pardon, gentlemen all! For one little breath I forgot me—I forgot that luckless poverty has no rights, a bound servant no claims to manhood, even in his own eyes! And so—for that single breath I fought for what has no existence in your eyes, but now—tell me, my mighty masters! What heinous crime have I been guilty of?"

His voice waxed stronger, more clear and ringing as he spoke on, and when the ending came, his head was drawn proudly erect, his blue eyes were flashing like crystal drops filled with living fire.

"You deny all guilt, then, Mr. Richter?" asked Chief Paulette, coldly.

"Is that poor privilege left me, sir?"

"Until such denial is proven useless, of course. You plead?"

"Not guilty of more serious crime than that of poverty, friendlessness, lack of political influence, my masters!"

"Then—how do you account for the presence of all this in your bed-chamber, to which you alone carry the key?"

"If I alone, how did you win entrance, sir?"

"That is begging the question, and that question is—who placed those articles on your table, unless your hands did the work?"

Herman Richter look again at the damning evidence, and a barely perceptible shiver crept over his athletic frame before he made reply:

"I do not know whose hands placed those devil's tools there, but I do know this much: mine never did!"

"Who else could, then, if not you?" harshly cut in Gerald Quayle.

The accused gazed into that pale, sternly handsome face, then slowly answered:

"I might retort by speaking your name, Gerald, but—"

"Why, you infernal scoundrel!"

"I simply said I might retort with such a charge, but I do not. I no more believe you laid such a devilish trap than you believe in your secret heart that I could be guilty of such a dastardly crime, Gerald."

Something in face, voice or words caused young Quayle to check the fierce speech which had risen ready to interrupt that almost dignified defense. For the moment he had no answer which seemed fitting, and before he could amend the words to his liking, Chief Paulette once more took charge of the investigation.

"You say you did not place those articles as they were first discovered, as they now lie, Mr. Richter?"

"I did not, Mr. Paulette."

"And you have no idea who did arrange them?"

"No more than you have—if as much," with a slight bow to point his meaning clearer.

"They were not on the table, then, when you left this room last evening, at or about six o'clock, Mr. Richter?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"If they had been there you could hardly have escaped seeing them?"

"Hardly. They were not on the table, sir, when I left this room."

There came a short silence, as though the chief of police felt at a loss for words; but that was only a thin mask, for he abruptly asked:

"And you swear you never saw or heard of anything like it before?"

Herman Richter flushed a bit at this question, and as though involuntarily he cast a sidelong glance toward the Insurance Detective.

Although that face surely told no tales, it seemed to hold a warning against telling a lie, for the accused said, in low, unsteady tones:

"I do not say that. I never took any such oath. That would be a lie, for I have both seen and heard of the like."

"May I ask when, and where?" bluntly queried the chief.

"In Chicago. Before I came out here."

"When you were a member in good standing of the Liberty Bund?"

That faint flush died out, leaving the bookkeeper's face almost deathlike in its pallor. His lips quivered, his eyes took on a hunted expression, his hands clinched, more to conceal the trembling of his fingers than through growing rage as it seemed.

"Yes. When I was a member. Of the Liberty Bund."

Slowly, painfully, seemingly in spite of himself, these brief sentences dropped from those blanched lips. And then, with fierce scorn blending with his hatred, Gerald Quayle blurted forth:

"A gang of anarchists, communists, dynamiters, fire-bugs! You a full-fledged member of such an infernal outfit, Herman Richter, yet dare to pretend honest indignation when you are charged with practicing what you and yours have so often preached?"

The accused shrunk visibly, but his eyes turned toward the father, not upon the son, for from those aged lips came a hoarse, pained cry, followed by the almost fierce words:

"Tell them 'tis a lie—all a lie, Richter! Fling it back in the teeth of—what?" his tones turning shrill through intense emotion as the accused shrunk still further away. "You flinch? Say that it is all a lie, Herman Richter, else I'll curse the black day that I first permitted you to enter my house

to deceive—brand the lie, boy, I command ye!”

But that denial failed to come in the shape Bantry Quayle wished.

CHAPTER XI.

PRINCE JOHN'S GOOD WORD.

SURELY an innocent man would have been swift to grasp such an opportunity when so offered, but instead of boldly vowing his innocence, the accused shrunk still more perceptibly, one hand trying to cover his now ghastly pale face, the other lifted imploringly toward the merchant.

“Look! He dare not deny it, father!” cried Gerald Quayle, with a short, bitter laugh as he pointed the finger of scorn at the cowering bookkeeper. “He was a member of the Liberty Bund, then; he is still an anarchistic fire-bug, now!”

“Tell him he lies, Richter!” again commanded Bantry Quayle, only less pale than the accused in those moments. “You never were—you are *not* one of those foul-mouthed curs?”

“Don’t—I beg!” chokingly said the German, plainly striving to rally, yet looking more and more the criminal, despite the words which he managed to force past his lips. “As heaven hears me, sir, I am guiltless now—I was guiltless then!”

It was an effort at manly denial, and though it hardly took the shape which Bantry Quayle desired in his fiery temper, the merchant was inclined to accept his plea, judging from his softened tones.

“I know it couldn’t be so bitter black as they try to make out, men, dear, only—brand the lies, then, I tell ye, Richter!”

Gerald Quayle laughed at this juncture, and meeting his sneering face and eyes aglow with hatred, the accused seemed unable to follow up even the slight advantage that liking had won for him.

Through all, Prince John had been taking note, for himself caring little how the affair might end, since he felt confidence in justice coming out on top at the finish.

But now, seeing that Gerald Quayle was inclined to press his advantage without mercy, the Insurance Detective stepped forward, one hand lightly touching the bookkeeper’s arm as he spoke:

“May I ask room for a word or two, right here, gentlemen?”

Although his address seemed impersonal, Chief Paulette answered.

“We’ll be more than pleased to hear what you have to offer, Mr. Prince.”

“Thanks. You’ll not object, Mr. Richter?”

A swift, almost deadly look was the sole answer vouchsafed by the bookkeeper, but he threw off that lightly resting hand much as one might dash away some venomous serpent.

A faint smile came into the face of the detective, but he made no attempt to replace that member; instead, he stepped back to his former station before saying aught further.

“What is it, Mr. Prince?” asked the chief of police.

“Merely a word or two in confirmation of Mr. Richter’s plea, chief, and you, gentlemen,” with a formal bow to the others present. “I knew him during at least a portion of his residence in Chicago, and so far as my knowledge runs, there was never the slightest stigma of crime placed against his honor.”

Herman Richter, who surely had not expected such words, made as if he would clasp the hand of the detective who thus spoke a good word for him when it was so sorely needed; but as Gerald Quayle broke into a low and sneering laugh just then, he recoiled, his scarred face flushing red.

“His honor!” echoed the young man, scornfully. “The honor of a branded anarchist, dynamiter, fire-bug!”

“Silence, boy!” sharply reproved Bantry Quayle, who evidently had some powerful reason for wishing his bookkeeper to come unscathed through this painful ordeal, and who still clung to hope. “You have said so much, sir, you surely can say more?”

“I can go a bit deeper into details, if that is necessary, yes,” admitted the detective. “Shall I, sir?”

“If you know anything that bears upon this case, certainly, Mr. Prince, pray proceed,” just a bit stiffly decided Chief Paulette.

“All right. I’ll not keep you longer than I can well help, now I’ve made the break. And you—well, never mind, just now.”

Prince John passed one hand lightly over his face, which bore evidence of his fire-fight of the past night, then abruptly resumed:

“It’s all solid, about that Liberty Bund, in Chicago. There was—and I imagine there always *will be*—just such an organization, run on the quiet just now, though!”

“And Mr. Richter was a member of that secret order; you say?”

“He was.”

“What was that order based upon, please, Mr. Prince?”

“Anything but law, order, brotherly love and Christianity, I reckon,” answered the Insurance Detective with a low, brief laugh.

“Why not talk flatfooted, sir?” sharply cut in Gerald Quayle. “Why not give them the correct brand for such cattle? Anarchists, dynamiters, incendiaries—and not confined to their mouths, either!”

“I never knew—as high Heaven hears my oath, dear sir, I never even shared those vile secrets!” impulsively cried Herman Richter, his still unsteady hand going out toward the merchant whose favorable opinion seemed so highly valued by the accused.

But since he could not deny all, denying part hardly satisfied Bantry Quayle, and his frown grew darker, his face sterner as he made no reply to his employee.

Prince John showed no signs of irritation at this interruption, and there was even a dim smile visible in his face as he spoke again, his keen eyes fixed upon the face of the younger Quayle.

“You’re pretty well posted, looks like, young man. The Liberty Bund *did* have rather more than a fair share of black sheep who bore, or ought to bear, the brand you suggest.”

“Then why try to blot out *his* brand?”

“That’s another thing altogether, Mr. Quayle, and right here you have the solid talk you hungered for last minute: Herman Richter is not now, nor was he then branded after that nasty fashion!”

“Was he a member of the gang, sir?” demanded the merchant, his tones so cold that they were fairly harsh and grating to the ear.

“To a certain extent, yes,” frankly admitted the detective. “But he was not so bad as—”

“Belonging to such a pack of gallows-fruit—taking their oaths and sharing their infernal plots—surely *that* is crime enough to damn a score, let alone one individual?” hotly cried Gerald Quayle.

“Crime, enough, surely!” echoed his father, pale and stern.

To the younger man Herman Richter paid no heed, but he once more made a gesture of almost piteous appeal to the father, his voice sounding strained and unnatural through intense emotion.

“Condemn me not yet, my dear sir! Think—try to *think*, just a moment, I beg of you! Then—I was not *all* to blame, surely?”

“If not you, who was to blame?”

“My youth, my folly, my teaching over in the Fatherland, where I was first trained to hate injustice as one hates—*ach mein lieber herr!* ’Twas not I—’twas my hot blood, my foolish longing for Heaven on earth!”

Prince John moved near enough to give his arm a friendly touch, and when Herman Richter glanced that way, he good-naturedly spoke:

“Go at it cool and easy, pardner. Just talk it off as though you knew you were among true friends. The naked facts count most, you know.”

“It was so then—it is so now, sir,” said the accused, still paying attention solely to his employer. “I could see so many vile wrongs to right! I could see so many shameful crimes—”

“Arson and assassination, for instance?” sneered Gerald Quayle. “So many crimes, is it? And to even up matters, you resorted to bombs and infernal machines like—*this*, for instance!”

A hand pointed to the pine table where the imperfect fire trap yet lay as discovered, but Herman Richter never glanced that way. He took an impulsive step forward, his

strong hands going out as though they ached to clutch that throat; but just as swiftly he recoiled, averting his face, lowering his handcuffed arms, muttering huskily as if to himself:

“No, no! *Her* brother—forgive—forget—*her sake!*!”

It hardly seemed possible that one could bear malice sufficient to follow up a thrust under such painful circumstances, but evidently Chief Paulette believed Gerald Quayle meant to do just that, for he stepped quickly forward and let fall a hand in warning, coldly speaking:

“You have said enough for now, Mr. Quayle. Oblige me by maintaining silence, please. Now—Mr. Prince?”

“At your service, sir.”

“Will you complete what you started to say, concerning that Chicago affair?”

“Certainly I will, although there’s not so very much more to say,” came the good-natured reply. “Mr. Richter, being a member of the Liberty Bund as openly organized and conducted, naturally was gathered in when the time came for a raid of the police force.”

“I had done no sin, gentlemen.”

“Nothing worse than the sin of imprudence, Richter,” quickly spoke the Insurance Special. “And *that’s* the precise point I wished to make evident, Chief Paulette, and you, gentlemen; at the trial which followed that raid, though Herman Richter was on the stand for half a day, not one scintilla of actual crime could be proven against him!”

“Yet he was a full-fledged member, associating daily with those who were proven incendiaries and common thieves!” hotly cut in young Quayle, unable to let an opening pass unimproved.

“A modern instance of poor dog Tray; nothing worse, on my word, gentlemen,” positively asserted the detective, then stepping back like one who has fully said his say.

Herman Richter flashed a look of gratitude his way, but said nothing, nor made any effort to further prove his thanks for that good word.

Gerald Quayle said nothing. The merchant looked sour and far from content with the way matters were going, but one could see that he would only too gladly welcome a complete vindication of his employee.

“You have covered the ground fairly well, Mr. Prince, and our thanks are your due,” politely said the head of police, with a bow that way. “But your certificate of good character was given *then*, while now—”

He turned toward the accused, speaking directly to him:

“As an officer of the law, Mr. Richter, I naturally pay more or less careful attention to what takes place in other localities. Of course I am not entirely ignorant of that Chicago affair, and I have good reasons for thinking that the methods which were employed by the fire-bugs in the Lake City, are now coming into use here. For example—*this!*”

Head and hand motioned toward the table where that devilishly ingenious contrivance lay.

“You can easily understand its working. I think, even if you never saw or heard of such a contrivance.”

“Have I not frankly owned to such, sir?” coldly asked the accused. “I saw the machine, as you call it, exhibited and fully explained in the court-room, Chicago.”

“Thanks. Then you know that if this fuse—you can see that it has been lighted—had burned to the powder, that exploding would have eaten through this greasy bladder, letting free the benzine with which the skin is nearly filled.”

As he spoke thus, the chief of police illustrated his meaning with steady finger as indicator. Then, sweeping a hand around to include the pine table, partition, floor, all highly inflammable when once fairly attacked, he added:

“An explosion would have cast a rain of fire all over this chamber, and with such a start, not all the fire-fighters of Frisco could have hindered this great building and its valuable contents from going up in flames!”

Taking a small rule from his pocket and marking the length of ash at the end of the

imperfect slow-match, then doing the same with that portion still intact, Chief Paulette spoke again:

"You say you did not arrange this fire-trap, Mr. Richter?"

"I swear I had nothing whatever to do with it, sir."

"On your oath, then?"

"On my oath, sir. I swear I am wholly innocent, by the bones of my dead and sainted mother!"

There was a brief pause following this impetuous speech, then Chief Paulette gave the result of his measurements and calculations.

"That fuse could have been burning longer than an hour, I judge. Now, sir, if you can fully and fairly account for that hour—where did you spend your night, Mr. Richter?"

"Now's your chance, man!" almost fiercely cried Bantry Quayle. "Out with it, man! An *alibi*—prove an *alibi*, or—fare worse, faith!"

But the accused slowly shook his head, eyes drooping and a painful flush coming into his care-lined face.

"I can't—I cannot say, sir!"

"You must, sir!" sternly spoke the chief of police. "You *must* say, or fare worse. Unless—where were you between the hours of eleven and twelve, last night, Herman Richter?"

"Silence will surely condemn you, sir, so—better speak out!"

CHAPTER XII.

HERMAN RICHTER'S DEFENSE.

THESE words came from the lips of Bantry Quayle, but even they had no power to rouse up that drooping form. It seemed almost as though the accused was breaking down beneath his load of guilt; but not all of those present took that view of his case.

For one, Prince John was inclined to look upon the prisoner with more favor than at first. Strangely though the bookkeeper was acting, almost criminally, considering the gravity of the accusation brought against him, the Insurance Detective could not make himself believe it was all due to conscious guilt.

Still, he had finished all he had to say for the present, and while sympathizing with the embarrassed man, he saw no fair chance of lending him a helping hand before he should try to save himself.

A perceptible shiver ran over the bookkeeper's frame as he shrunk a bit further from the harsh-toned merchant, but then his drooping lids lifted and he appealed to—Chief Paulette!

"If I can say sufficient concerning my movements last night to satisfy you, sir, will not that be enough?" he asked, huskily, anxiously.

"No!" sharply cried Gerald Quayle in objection. "All of us! Prove your *alibi* before us all—if you can, Herman Richter!"

"Will you oblige me, Mr. Quayle?" coldly spoke the chief, his blue eyes sparkling ominously as he frowned upon the young man. "I have taken this matter in charge, and when I require your assistance, pray allow me to ask for it. You comprehend?"

"If he doesn't, there's more room outside," bluntly declared Bantry Quayle. "Quiet, will you, man?"

There came another brief pause and silence after the hot-tempered young man was "sat down on" by his father, during which period Chief Paulette seemed inwardly debating that point with himself.

His decision was not long delayed, however, and he spoke gravely:

"Will you kindly indulge us a few moments, gentlemen? Please step outside for a minute or two, unless, indeed, you prefer to remain here while this gentleman and myself—"

"We'll do the adjournment act, chief, with all the pleasure in life," genially declared Prince John, setting a good example for the rest by passing over to the door, which he unlocked and swung open.

If the others were less willing to be deprived of a portion of the sensation, none of them saw fit to openly object to taking their departure, Bantry Quayle shoving Gerald ahead of himself, while Orson McAleney brought up the rear.

When Prince John closed the door and the

faint sound of footfalls dying away gave ample evidence that only those two ears could catch his words, Herman Richter spoke out, without waiting to be questioned:

"I can't tell you where I was last night, sir, because I don't know!"

"You don't know?" echoed the surprised official.

"I don't know. I believe I was drugged to insensibility. I did not fairly come to my senses until day had dawned, and then I was coming in this direction, looking as you see me, sir."

Herman Richter flung out his arms as well as he could with handcuffs on his wrists, looking over his person with plain disgust: but Virgo Paulette had no room for considering such comparative trifles as a ruined suit of clothes, just then.

Flinching slightly as he looked up again, to meet those wonderfully keen blue eyes riveted upon his face, Herman Richter hurriedly added:

"I knew that I ought to renovate myself, sir. I knew that if—and so I made what haste I might, although twice I remember turning deathly ill while yet on my way—and then, I was stopped by the police!"

"You claim that you were drugged to insensibility?" asked Chief Paulette when the bookkeeper ceased his hardly coherent explanation. "How could that come about?"

"In a glass of beer."

"Who by, and for what reason?"

"It is this way, sir," said the bookkeeper, speaking with the painstaking deliberation of one who feels that each word is of importance. "I came up here, after the store closed, as usual. I lodge here, but I take my meals outside."

"Of course. Go on, please. About the drugging part?"

"I felt me a little parched in the throat—you understand? And so, after locking up the place, I goes me—I went down street, as usual, sir. And then—you know the saloon down yonder?"

"I know there are such places, but—go on, I beg, Mr. Richter."

"I thought me of a single glass beer—no more, I assure you! And right there I met me with an old-time friend. And so—we went the place inside of—and had the beer."

Herman Richter spoke in low, even tones, but his lapsing into the little idioms which he had so long outgrown was ample evidence as to his internal uneasiness, and Chief Paulette did not fail to make mental note to that effect.

"How many times did you drink with this old-time friend, Richter?"

"Only the one time, sir; on my honor—I swear to you, then, that I took but the single glass beer! And then—we left the saloon, and I can remember me nothing more as just that, sir!"

Chief Paulette frowned sternly as he tried to read what might lie back of that sorely-troubled countenance. This surely could not be the truth? And yet—as though knowing how surely he was then on trial, Herman Richter braced up, meeting that burning gaze fairly, unflinchingly.

Was he speaking the truth, or was this all a lie? If the last, then it was all the more dangerous because of its very improbability.

"This friend of yours, Richter; who was he? What is his name?"

A hot flush came into that pale face, but the answer came promptly.

"Leopold Blume."

Chief Paulette gave a nod, and a grim smile flitted across his face at the sound of that name.

"One of the old Chicago gang! No wonder you were loth to admit in whose company you passed at least a portion of your time, Mr. Richter!"

The bookkeeper shook his head vigorously then ejaculated:

"It is not so—not that way, sir!"

"Why did you refuse to speak out, then?"

"Not because of Leopold Blume, or because he was once, like myself, a brother of the Liberty Bund in Chicago," declared Richter, his voice steadying with the emergency; for he could not help seeing what harm he had worked his own cause by admitting such a meeting.

"If not that, what reason did you hold sufficient?"

"I am to make that clear to your understanding, sir," said the accused, forcing himself to outward composure lest he still further damage his forlorn hope. "To do that I must open my heart—I must confide in your honor, as a gentleman. I *may* do that, Mr. Paulette?"

"Unless you can make your explanation sufficiently clear without touching on private matters. You are the proper judge as to that," said the officer, gravely, almost sternly.

Herman Richter dropped his head, a little shiver running over his frame the while.

Was he merely playing a cunning part? Was this anything more than a superb counterfeit?

Chief Paulette asked himself these questions during that brief pause, but he could not answer them to his own satisfaction, as yet.

"There is no other way open, Mr. Paulette, that I can see," said Herman Richter, presently, looking up to encounter that intense gaze.

"And so—listen, pray!"

"It was not because I was ashamed of my one-day good-friend, Leopold Blume, that I refused to speak out before Mr. Quayle, but because I feared he would think me drunken, not drugged!"

"Why should you fear him more than you do my judgment, Richter?"

"Why? Because there is a lady—Miss Quayle!" began the bookkeeper, with difficulty keeping his voice articulate. "And her father—oh, sir!" casting aside his lovely reticence, coming a bit closer to the man who, in a certain measure, held his fate at his mercy. "Help me to fight my way through this devil's snare! Let me feel that—"

Richter cut himself short, then, with a powerful effort at self-control he resumed, more naturally:

"You have my secret, now, sir, and I beg that you will believe I have lifted that veil only because I feel my more than life depends on convincing you that I am *not* such a fiend as Gerald—but he is *her* brother! Don't let me forget that, pray Heaven!"

"Have you shared this secret with any others, Mr. Richter?"

"With the family, yes," quickly answered the bookkeeper. "It was not pleasant news to them: it was bitter to the brother, objectionable to the father, at first. Then—well, my love won *his* consent, on conditions."

"And those conditions?"

"It is that I am coming to, sir. I was once very fond of my glass: not a swine-drunkard—never that! But I was a German, and that is to say this: I was used to my glass of beer, often times over, now, then, anytime, when one of your Americans would take a sip of water. Is that plain?"

"I think I catch your meaning, yes. Pray go on, faster, if possible."

"I did not hide this liking; why should I, so? And that became known to my employer. And then—he has a holy horror of all drunkards, you comprehend?"

"Naturally," for the chief of police knew the sort of skeleton which a close search would have brought to light in Bantry Quayle's closet. "And he bound you by an oath never to drink—even beer?"

"No, not so bad like that! But he *did* swear—hard and savage—that if he ever had cause to even suspect me of drinking to excess, or of touching anything stronger than a glass of beer, three times each day, that he would forbid me his house, and break off the match between his daughter and myself!"

Knowing what he did of Bantry Quayle, Chief Paulette began to think that, after all, it might be possible this young man was far more sinned against than sinning; yet he put a number of keen questions in rapid succession, trying to gain more light on that real or pretended drugging.

But Herman Richter either could not or would not make the point any plainer. He swore that he had taken but one glass of beer in company with Leopold Blume, then left the saloon, to lose all consciousness of time and locality until day had dawned and he was unsteadily making his way toward the store, thinking to renovate himself before either of the Quayles, father or

son, could see him in such suspicious disorder.

Finding it useless to press further questions, Chief Paulette reflected for a minute, after which he decided that Herman Richter must repeat his story before the rest of the little company.

It was a trying ordeal, but after a single imploring look into that strong face, now cold and set as though cast of iron, the book-keeper consented, and opening the door, Chief Paulette called the others back to the little chamber.

In low tones, but betraying much less agitation than he had when speaking to the chief of police alone, Herman Richter told his tale, and was greeted by a storm of angry words from the father, with stinging cuts and sneers from the son.

"It is simple truth I have told you, gentleman," he asserted, with no little dignity. "I swear to that, by my proudest, my dearest, my only hope for the future!" he added, so shaping his words that Bantry Quayle could hardly fail to catch his full meaning.

"I took but the single glass of beer. As to that, if my bare word as one who was once treated as a gentleman, is insufficient proof, take me to the saloon, and I will abide by the evidence of its keeper!"

"There is something in that, for a fact," declared Chief Paulette, "and it may be just as well to drop in there while on our way to— May I have a word with you, Mr. Prince?"

Stepping aside from the rest, Chief Paulette whispered briefly in the detective's ear, then acted after the same manner with Chief McAleney.

"I think we have finished with this portion of the business, Mr. Quayle," he added, aloud, as he returned to resume charge of the accused.

"What are you going to do with Richter?" bluntly asked the merchant.

"Take him with me for the present, sir. You will look after that bit of evidence, Mr. McAleney?"

"Trust me for that, then!" with a short, grim chuckle as he turned toward the table where the imperfect fire-trap lay.

As though he felt that sufficient explanation had been given, Chief Paulette touched the prisoner on an arm as a hint to get into motion, and then the twain passed out of the chamber, followed by the Quayles, father and son, with Prince John leisurely bringing up the rear.

No more words were spoken until the first floor was reached, where Chief Paulette sent one of his officers out to fetch a close carriage.

Until this came up, Herman Richter was held in the office, but as the policeman reported, those handcuffs were removed, and arm-in-arm the prisoner and his guardian left the building, to enter a close hack and be driven rapidly away from the spot.

CHAPTER XIII.

NOBLE FEATHERKYL'S REGRETS.

ON the evening of that same day, Gerald Quayle was seated at a small table in a fairly-fashionable restaurant where he semi-occasionally took his meals, whenever business or pleasure hindered his going to his up-town home.

Ordering a liberal provision from the *carte*, the young man leaned back in his seat, to glance over the evening edition of his paper while waiting for his order to be filled; but, though there was a "scare head" article on the recent fire which promised him an interesting appetizer while waiting, 'twas not to be taken, just then.

A gentleman of something under middle age; say in the neighborhood of thirty-five years; stepped briskly into the restaurant, stopping short as he caught sight of the younger man down the apartment.

This new-comer was none other than the lawyer, Noble Featherkyl, who waxed so emphatic in his utterance anent the slipshod methods of the chief of police and his force, shortly after the failure of the bomb-thrower to rid this world of two of its ornaments, in the shape of Prince John, the Insurance Special and Fire-chief Orson McAleney.

As he now stood, the full light from a pendant gasolier fell over his face and person, revealing a face of a certain type, and a

little if anything over the average height of his sex, and carrying only normal weight of matter, something about this free-spoken disciple of Coke and Blackstone was wont to impress the observer strongly; whether favorably or otherwise, however, depended mainly on the nature of the one who took those notes.

To a large head which was almost a cube in outline, was attached a countenance powerful rather than handsome, yet few there were who would call Noble Featherkyl other than comely, while many would insist on the stronger term.

Massive forehead, high, broad, square; strongly accented brows; large yet firm mouth; powerful jaws; a remarkable face, taken all-in-all, and wearing no mask in the shape of beard, whiskers or mustaches.

Pausing only long enough to make sure he had not mistaken his man, and with another keen glance which showed him there were only two other patrons then at table, both of whom were seated at the other side of the spacious apartment, Noble Featherkyl stepped briskly toward the table at which Gerald Quayle was seated, yet with a tread so elastic that young gentleman was plainly taken by surprise as a hand dropped on a shoulder.

"Evening to ye, Gerald, my lad!"

"You!" ejaculated Quayle, turning with a start, and the hot flush which had come into his face at the touch, fading away even more rapidly.

He flinched visibly as he met that keen yet kindly gaze, although he made an effort to cover that weakness over by speaking sharply:

"Confound you, man! You might as well kill a fellow as to scare him to death!"

"Thought one of our delightfully incompetent police had found a collar he didn't know what else to do with, and was giving it to you?" jestingly asked the lawyer, sinking in a chair at the end of the little table.

"I've nothing to do with the police, and so—"

"Lucky you, my lad!" heaving an exaggerated sigh the while. "There's not a single grain of sound wheat in a whole carlot of that chaff! Not enough honor, manhood, honesty, decency or intelligence on our pet force to stock one poor curbstone Dago, or keep a fish-stand John from cheating himself with one hand while the other does its level best to tote fair!"

This truly characteristic tirade served to restore Gerald's upset equilibrium, it seemed, for his low laugh was natural when it came as greeting to that peroration.

"That will do for you to say, Featherkyl, but all who know you at all, know that your tongue's no scandal, so far as the police department of Frisco is concerned."

"Are you really one whit the more in love with it, old man? If you could despise less, wouldn't you hate more?"

"I've no complaint to make, Featherkyl."

"Then all you need is a few pinfeathers and a meek smile to be an angel in spotless white drapery, Gerald Quayle!" solemnly declared the lawyer, leaning a bit further back in his chair as the waiter came with the order given by young Quayle.

By the time that little mountain of side-dishes had been deposited in place, the lawyer was ready with his order, and when the white-aproned attendant skurried away once more, his red-lips parted to add:

"I never could enjoy myself while feeding solus, and so—then, too, you're precisely the fellow I was most heartily hoping to meet up with, Quayle!"

"Thanks, awfully."

"Don't mention it, man, dear! It costs me nothing, and—well, not to put too fine a polish upon it—how did your little racket at the store turn out, Gerald?"

Again that hot flush and uneasy stir, but Noble Featherkyl was not a man to permit any slight obstacle to stand in the way of his wishes, and so coolly added:

"Of course you feel bound to secrecy, and all that rot, lad, but equally of course that don't bar me out. Does it?"

"Of course not only—"hesitated the younger man.

"Because, if you really think that way, I have full absolution ready and waiting for you. Virgo Paulette told me part, and when we were interrupted by a caller on

important business, hinted that you could supply whatever was lacking in case you saw fit. So—how did she pan out, Gerald, my buck?"

"How much did Paulette leak, first?"

"Sufficient to prove that you must have had a regular cat-and-monkey sort of racket at the shop to-day! How was it, Quayle?"

Thus assured that the lawyer really had at least an inkling of the case, and probably feeling that, such being true, it would be wisest to give his view of the matter more fully, Gerald Quayle briefly but clearly ran over the main points, taking especial care to dwell longest upon those items which made the affair look darkest for Herman Richter.

Noble Featherkyl listened to this recital, only broken by the coming of the waiter with that second ordering of food, and resumed the moment he passed beyond ear-shot.

All signs of humor had left his strong face. His intensely-black eyes now held a red glow as of a smoldering fire, and his powerful jaws seemed to grow more square as his teeth locked upon each other.

"And there you have the clean-up, Featherkyl!" declared Quayle, when his story was told. "Herman Richter is in limbo, and if he don't fetch up for a good long term at San Quentin, then I don't want a cent!"

Noble Featherkyl leaned back in his chair, giving vent to a low, dry chuckle, his full lips curling in a half-sneer as he gazed at the speaker.

Gerald Quayle flushed swiftly, then sharply demanded:

"What the devil do you mean by laughing like that, Featherkyl?"

"At your verdancy, man, dear!"

"My—what?"

"Do you honestly believe all that rot, then, Gerald?"

"I've told you nothing but the truth, and you know it, sir!"

"I know this: that you're woefully behind the times, Quayle," said the lawyer, abruptly altering both tones and manner, leaning far enough forward to lay a sympathizing hand on that of his young friend.

"So far from the head-bookkeeper being on his way to San Quentin, Herman Richter has evidently fully satisfied Chief Paulette of his complete innocence."

"Oh, you're 'way off your base, man!"

"Don't you believe I am, Jerry! I'm dealing the papers out straight as a string, and from a regulation deck, too!"

"Innocent!"

"Well, if not quite that, how else did Richter gain his perfect freedom? For that he is at liberty now, free to come and go as either you or me, Quayle, I'll take my Bible oath!"

"At liberty? Herman Richter?" muttered the younger man, seemingly half dazed by that totally unexpected information.

Noble Featherkyl cast a quick, precautionary glance around, but only one additional patron had entered the restaurant, while the other two had taken their departure. That late comer was buried in an evening paper while waiting for his supper, and too far away to play cavedropper, even should he feel inclined that way.

"I hate to have it to say, Jerry, and that's no secret to you, lad. I love your sister now, even more than I did before I drew off the track when she favored that—Herman Richter! But now—it's mainly on Norah's account that I so deeply regret this infernal weakness of one who should be strong as impartial—but what better can you expect from a cur like Virgo Paulette?"

Gerald Quayle still kept silence. That information seemed to have fairly stunned him, and he had not yet recovered from the shock.

Noble Featherkyl spoke on rapidly, his tones lowered but his strong interest in the affair wholly without disguise, now.

He let fall enough to show that, at some not very distant period, he had been an open and avowed suitor for the hand of Norah Quayle, sister to Gerald, and only daughter of Bantry Quayle and Rose, his wife.

It was shown, too, that his suit had not prospered after the coming to the front of the blonde German, but an impression was left behind that the lawyer held the welfare and wishes of the lady even above his own desires, and so had withdrawn from the

field, leaving the then happy lovers to—reach this ending!

Gerald Quayle rallied from his shock, but before he could find the right words in which to express his feelings, a little party of "bloods" entered, settling down at the two nearest tables, thus effectually putting an end to all talk of a confidential or private nature between the two friends hard by.

Thanks to this interruption Quayle and Featherkyl finished their meal in less time than would have been consumed under different circumstances, and settling their scores, lighting cigars at the counter, they passed out of the restaurant and walked slowly down the street, arm-in-arm, conversing as they went.

This was an easy matter enough, although there were many wayfarers at that early hour; but one is never more alone than when in a city crowd.

Noble Featherkyl readily gave proof of his former words, asked for by Gerald Quayle, thus showing beyond room for a doubt that, through some as yet unsuspected influence, Herman Richter had been turned free as of old, before any such damaging accusation had been brought against him with ample proof to back that charge up.

"It's only too easy to guess what he'll be doing," moodily muttered the lawyer, striking viciously with his cane the while. "He'll call at your place, to see Norah—"

"Curse him! Better not!"

"Ditto to the first, anyway!" heartily said the lawyer. "As for the other—look to that, Gerald Quayle! It's *your* duty to guard against that, I tell you, man!"

"What can I do, more than I've already done?" muttered the young man, an uneasy echo in his tones.

"You can open eyes, once for all! Why, man, dear, would you let your own and only sister fall a helpless victim to that infernal anarchist? Would you stand meekly by and see her future ruined by that all but convicted fire-bug? And this without even lifting hand or voice?"

Noble Featherkyl spoke with passionate vigor, although his voice maintained that same prudent pitch. So fierce, indeed, that Gerald Quayle actually shrunk away so suddenly as to free his arm from that strong hand.

"What *can* I do, more than I have already done?" he repeated, huskily.

"Go directly home from here," crisply said the lawyer, talking like master to dull pupil. "If I am correct in my guess, Herman Richter has or shortly will call at your place, in hopes of smoothing this ugly affair over in the eyes of your sister."

"She can't get over the proof that—"

"Make it part of your business to see that she can't get over that damning evidence, then!" sternly cut in the lawyer. "Left to him—bah! A woman wholly in love will see black as white if the right pair of lips bid or beg her to do that!"

"Why can't *you* do the job, then?" hesitatingly asked Gerald Quayle, who evidently disliked the duty being imposed upon him so strongly.

"Don't be a bigger idiot than nature intended, man," bluntly spoke the lawyer, at this. "You know why I can't move more actively in this case, or—well, unless an utter idiot you *ought* to know why!"

"Thank you!"

"No need, Jerry," with an abrupt return to his former more agreeable manner. "If I gave you words with the bark on, you know why. And knowing so much, you'd ought to know even more."

"What, for instance?"

"That unless this Richter is fairly turned down, once for all, you will not only lose a sister, but will gain an enemy who may give you the crook, next grapple!"

"If I only knew how he managed to get free!"

"Through hearty lying, or heavy bribery, of course!" with that old half-savage scorn for the Police Department entering his voice once more. "But that cuts mighty little figure, right now, Jerry."

"I know, but—"

"The main point is this: if the rascal *does* call at your place, you want to show him up in his proper colors to Norah. Don't spare the paint brush, either!" with a short, hard chuckle. "Call on *me* to bear you out, if

you require an authority, but—above all—brand Herman Richter for what he surely is: an anarchist, a dynamiter, a fire-bug!"

"If Norah'll only listen, that is!"

"She *must* listen, man! Ah, don't I wish I was at liberty to act as her champion! I'd not only show the rascal up in his true colors, but I'd lend him a few additional ones—with these!"

Noble Featherkyl clinched his fists and shook them in the air. He looked just the sort of man who could perform all such threats, too!

Then stopping abruptly near a corner lamp, to glance at the dial of his watch, he hastily uttered:

"I'll leave you, now, Jerry; an appointment, you know! But—think you'll be down-town again, this evening, lad?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Drop in on me, please, if you do come down again?"

"All right: I will," decided Gerald, then striding away rapidly.

CHAPTER XIV.

A LOVER'S BROKEN PLEA.

NOBLE FEATHERKYL had spoken no more than the truth when he asserted that he had seen Herman Richter, head-bookkeeper for the firm of Quayle & Co., walking the streets of San Francisco, free as air, so far as outward appearances went, at least.

Only himself and Chief Virgo Paulette knew on what terms or conditions that release from custody was arranged, but one fact may be stated right here: there was precious little gayety or lightness of heart expressed in the face of Herman Richter as he slowly approached the almost palatial residence of Bantry Quayle on that same evening.

While pausing to look at his watch under a gas-lamp, the light fell upon his face, showing it pale beyond the ordinary, and wearing marks and lines of pain or remorse which added nearly half a score years to his apparent age.

And yet this man was an accepted lover, bound now for the home of the one woman this world contained for him!

Still, even though he might have felt fully confident in the power and faith of that love, it is not so strange that the lover should hesitate, even while within sight of his goal; for Herman Richter had not seen or communicated with either Bantry Quayle or his son, since leaving them, in charge of the police, that same forenoon.

With the air of one who realized the worse than folly of delaying the plunge by lingering on the brink, Herman Richter strode forward, running lightly up those sandstone steps, sounding the bell without stopping to think further of what might await him beyond those closed doors.

His summons was promptly answered, and as the servant bowed in recognition of one who had for months past been a particularly welcome visitor beneath that roof, Richter saw that, as yet, his trouble was unsuspected by the humbler members of that household.

"Miss Quayle?" he asked, fearing to say more, lest his unsteady tones betray him too plainly.

His fears seemed entirely without foundation, for the servant made the regulation reply, and gracefully bowed the caller to the parlor where Norah Quayle was in waiting, apparently for just this visitor, judging from his more than cordial reception.

Never mind just what shape that reception assumed. They were acknowledged lovers, and both maid and man had a full share of ardent blood, with a mutual affection powerful enough to blind them both to false modesty. And so—they met!

From his first glance into that blushing, smiling, loving face, Herman Richter felt that Norah Quayle had not as yet learned of his grave trouble down at the store, but this hardly gave him undiluted pleasure.

True, it told him that Bantry Quayle could not have been wholly convinced of his guilt by the evidence supplied, but he also knew that the ugly tale must be told, sooner or later, and then—what would be the ending of it all?

He was asking himself these questions, even while his arms were closely about that full yet graceful shape, and then—with a

Quayle freed her waist, her white hands resting on the shoulders of her lover, eyes meeting eyes with something more than purely happy love.

In those eyes Herman now read the truth, now saw that he had been deceived at first, thanks to the perfect trust which this, his heart's sole love, still held in his integrity.

Those eyes told him that Norah Quayle had learned part, if not all of that which had transpired down-town, and though her every look and action proclaimed her perfect love and trust, his heart sunk heavily and his face turned pale as before.

"You *do* know—you *have* heard, then?" he huskily asked, shrinking back as far as those closing fingers would permit him without actual force in breaking away.

"I have heard something, yes, Herman," answered Norah, in her deep, mellow tones, so inexpressibly charming in a woman.

"And you—from whose lips, Norah?"

"Father told me there had been some trouble down-town, and would not have told me even so much, had I not felt uneasy about his worried expression of face. And then—well, Herman, *you* know how I can mingle coaxings with commands?"

Norah laughed as she spoke, soft and mellowly, but her lover seemed wholly unable to join in her subdued merriment just then.

She knew! She had been told a part of his sore trouble! And now—he must explain it all to her, with those great Irish eyes watching his lips, his changing lines, his secret shame and chagrin!

Just then it seemed an easier task to defend himself against one who believed him guilty of the atrocious deed with which he stood accused, rather than explain his misfortunes to one who still loved, still trusted, still held loyal faith in his honor and integrity.

Norah Bantry was hardly a girl cast in conventional mold, leaving apart her grace and beauty of both face and form. Where she loved, there was no false shame in making the admission. Where she gave her heart, her faith, perfect trust went also.

And now, when trouble seemed to shadow that loved one's face, Norah Quayle did not shame to express her full faith in his unsullied honor.

With a swift movement her red-ripe lips were pressed to his, then dropped a seal lightly on his high forehead.

Drawing back just as swiftly, Norah spoke:

"I'm all Irish, ye know, Herman, and *that* means love and implicit faith! Now—sit down, dear, and tell me all about it, please."

Quietly, almost demurely, came that ending sentence, and Norah took a seat for herself, smiling kindly as she signed her lover to another just in front, where their eyes could meet readily.

Feeling considerably better now than he had when first crossing that threshold, Herman Richter obeyed the commands of his lady-love, so far as being seated was concerned. But he found it less easy to begin the plea for trust and continued faith which he knew must be made.

Even in his own eyes the case looked black against him, and while Norah declared her faith was unshaken and unshakable, he could not help thinking of what *must* come in case he failed to convince her reason of his perfect innocence.

It was a strong proof of his nervous dread that Herman Richter kept fingering the scarf-pin he wore; the head of a Sphinx, admirably carved out of a tiger-eye stone.

It was a habit which Norah had more than once noticed, and now, with a smile by way of reassurance, she spoke, softly:

"Am I so terrible, Herman? Am I so awe-inspiring, then? Ah, man, dear! will ye *never* learn what the love of a true-hearted Irish girl means, then?"

It was not often that Norah took up that soft, delicious word which so deeply proclaimed her ancestry; but now—that was different! She must lighten up this poor lad, and so that tiny bit of Irish blood!

"It's not that you are so terrible, Norah, only—what I've got to tell you is worse than terrible!" impulsively cried Richter, taking heart in spite of his fears for the future. "And yet, I swear that I have done nothing wrong, nothing criminal, never a thing

to fetch the blush of shame to my face before your honest eyes, darling!"

"Sure, and don't I know that same, then?" almost caressingly said the Irish girl, yet forbidding her lover to leave his seat by a swift, graceful gesture. "Not now, Herman, dear. After 'tis all told and over with, my man. First the bitter, then the—ah, the foolish tongue of me!"

With a low, mellow laugh, Norah covered those red lips with a soft palm, but above the hand there roguishly glanced those dark gray eyes, so large, so living, so maidenly modest for all.

Under such charming encouragement even a guilty man ought to find courage for pleading his cause, and so it was with Herman Richter; he no longer felt that to speak was to condemn himself, and poured forth a flood of explanations, telling much the same story he had told Chief of Police Virgo Paulette that same forenoon.

He was still telling this when, almost without a sound to warn the lovers, of what was impending, the parlor door was flung wide open, and the figure of Gerald Quayle stood revealed, face pale as death, but with features sternly set and dark eyes all ablaze with wrath and hatred.

"What are you doing here, Herman Richter, without a policeman guarding you?" he harshly demanded, stepping toward the lover as he spoke on. "Where are the steel cuffs you wore when I saw you last, you cur?"

"I am a free man once more, Mr. Quayle," answered Richter, rising to his feet, pale but composed so far as outward looks went.

"Because there are fools as well as knaves on the police force, then! You are a fire-bug, just as surely as though—"

"That charge is false as your accusation is baseless, Mr. Quayle."

"And *you're* a liar when you speak the words, Herman Richter!" cried the younger man, his hands clinched and his face turning red with rage.

Norah sprung between the two men, pleading and commanding peace in one and the same breath, but Gerald rudely shoved her aside, while saying:

"A liar you are, Herman Richter, and I'm to prove it! Either you are a fire-bug, and tried to burn us out last night, or else you are a drunkard, just over a swinish debauch so deep and so complete that you are unable to say where you spent the night, and thus prove an *alibi*!"

"I don't want any trouble with you—her brother—but—"

Herman Richter spoke with difficulty, and he flinched back as Gerald Quayle made a fierce gesture with clinched hand close in front of that ghastly pale face.

"Silence, you mangy hound! Either way totally unfits you for the society of honest, decent people, so—*go, you anarchistic hound!*"

With another threatening gesture Gerald Quayle pointed a hand toward the open door, but instead of beating a retreat as prudence would certainly dictate, Herman Richter turned toward Norah, who had fallen into a chair when her brother so violently flung her aside.

"You do not believe this, my love?" he huskily began, but as his powerful emotions fairly closed his throat for the moment, the really terrified girl gaspingly said:

"No—I don't believe any—*go, please go, Herman!*"

That uncertain speech came to the lover much as another man might have felt a heavy blow from a professed friend, and staggering almost like a drunken man, Herman Richter turned away toward the door, huskily saying as he passed by Gerald Quayle:

"You'll regret this, sir—to the hour of your death you will regret the cowardly blow you are dealing me now!"

"You cur! You infernal fire-bug!" cried the hot-blooded young man, either really or ostensibly construing those words into a personal threat. "You dare to snarl at me, dog!"

Gerald Quayle leaped after the retreating lover, striking viciously as he came, and then the two men closed in a savage grapple, where hands were freed long enough to get in a sounding blow, then both going to the door of the wide hall-way in company.

Norah screamed in womanly terror, and the servants came rushing to the scene; but before they could do more than look upon that disgraceful spectacle, Herman Richter tore himself away from Gerald and sprung to the threshold, sending back the words as he crossed it:

"You'll sup sorrow for this, Gerald Quayle! You'll regret this outrage to the very hour of your death—I swear it, before high heaven!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE TIGER-EYE SPHINX.

ALTHOUGH Prince John had very little to place on the docket as constituting his day's labor, after playing the part he did in the examination at the store, he certainly did not cut the time to waste entirely.

For one thing, it was pretty fairly proven that at least a remnant of the old Chicago "Liberty Bund" had settled down in Frisco, where they formed a body well worth looking after, even if they were not actually engaged in the diabolical arts which had first brought them prominently before the public in those still earlier days in Brooklyn and Jersey City.

To say nothing of the bomb-thrower, there was this evident attempt at incendiarism, as well as the fire next door, in addition to the series of conflagrations which had been the prime means of taking the Insurance Detective so far from his customary "stamping ground."

So, while accomplishing nothing which he felt at liberty to place on record for other eyes to scan, Prince John put in a tolerably busy day of it, and having one short night's rest to make up for, he was quite early between sheets on this occasion.

It was well along into the "wee sma' hours ayont the twal," when an officer came hurriedly into the rotunda of that hotel, asking the night-clerk for Mr. John Prince.

A glance at the key-rack, then the report:

"In, and asleep, presumably. What's wanted?"

"He is, and in a hurry, too. What room?"

"Forty-three. Next floor. Important enough to rout him out?"

"It's solid business, or I wouldn't be here, but—never mind the boy," as the clerk touched a gong-bell. "I'll turn the trick by my lonesome, if—"

The police-officer was away while he spoke, mounting the stairs as agilely as a boy who sees a treat or a reward just ahead of him. And by the time the night-boy answered the call, those official knuckles were rapping briskly at the door of 43.

Prince John was a sound sleeper, but a light one, and almost instantly his voice responded, with:

"All right, *you!* What's broken loose now?"

"Your name is Prince?"

"John Prince, yes. And yours?"

"Sergeant Ames, of the police force. Message for you from Chief Paulette, if you will be so—sorry, sir," changing his note as the door was opened by the Special in airy garb, "but you're wanted at the chief's office, just as quick as you can get there, sir!"

"All right. Step inside while I'm rigging out. Now—what's gone wrong?" briskly spoke the detective, as he closed the door and lit the gas, then began dressing.

"A bit of ugly work—murder, I fancy, sir."

"Any one—any one *you* know, rather?"

The officer hesitated before answering, but then said, slowly:

"I'm not so sure, sir, but I fancy it's young Quayle."

Prince John gave a start and a whistle at this totally unexpected reply, but surprise did not lessen his haste in slipping into his clothes, and as he pulled on his shoes and snatched up his hat, he turned off the gas and had the chamber door open before more could be said.

"You're going back, sergeant?"

"Only part of the way, for I've got—"

"All right; get a hustle on, please! Ask you more when we're on the outside."

Prince John surely had that "hustle on," just in from the rapidity of his movements.

and in a wonderfully scant measure of time the two men had passed out of the hotel into the night.

Once on that almost deserted street, Prince John asked his curt questions, and received his brief answers, the two men hurrying along on the nearest route to the Central Station, where Sergeant Ames said Chief Paulette was in waiting.

There was but little further information the officer could give, for he had pretty well emptied his budget at the send-off.

He knew that a death by violence had been reported by the police, and that the corpse had been taken direct to the Central, as the nearest station to the scene of the killing.

"I didn't see the body, nor hear for certain just who the man was, but somehow—I caught the name as I left the chief, to call you up."

Still, insufficient proof though this was that Gerald Quayle had been done to death, now that Prince John had time and breath for realizing the wide possibilities, those words were quite sufficient to shock him into silence; and shortly after, the officer branched off from that course to perform his further duty.

Prince John had no difficulty in finding his way to the rendezvous given him, and it only required the mention of his name to win him an immediate admission to the chief's private office.

Although grave, there was nothing in the face of the chief to confirm that ugly tale, but that fact did not at all surprise the Special. Brief as was his acquaintance with this man, so peculiar in many respects, he knew that no ordinary event could outwardly shake that composure.

"You sent for me, sir?" bluntly asked the detective as Chief Paulette bowed with his customary politeness. "What's gone wrong?"

"Did not the sergeant tell you, then, Mr. Prince?"

"He said that it was a murder case, and that he fancied the victim was Gerald Quayle. 'I trust that part was a mistake?'"

"Not one of the sergeant's making, then," gravely said the chief, as he moved toward the door of his office. "Will you kindly come with me, Mr. Prince?"

The detective stepped aside far enough to give the chief precedence, with an involuntary shiver as a hand just touched him in passing.

It was odd, he mentally admitted, but fact; this official gave him a chill through his strange, almost inhuman coolness.

Chief Paulette led the way to a room where a canvas cot upheld an object which had, only a few hours before, been a man: young, healthy, powerful, with every prospect of attaining a gray old age. Now—*this!*

A slender form clad in police gray was near that cot, and as one white hand mechanically rose in a salute, Chief Paulette spoke:

"There is no hope, then, surgeon?"

"None whatever, sir."

The gas-light was falling across that long, motionless form, and paying no attention to the others present, Prince John stepped lightly forward and gazed down into that gray, fixed face.

There was no room left for doubting the truth; this was Gerald Quayle, and he was a corpse!

Chief Paulette gave a nod to the surgeon, who quietly exposed that silent chest, where the keen steel had done its bloody work.

A long, curved slash, ugly to look at, but not deep enough to let out a life. Near this, narrow, purple-edged, clean-cut, was another wound, directly over the heart.

"There is a third wound, behind," softly uttered the surgeon, in explanation. "I fancy that was first delivered, and by a strong, steady hand, too! Then—there was a fight, necessarily brief, during which these wounds in front were given."

"Unless this," said Chief Paulette, a finger-tip just touching that heart-thrust, "was given after the fight was over, to make assurance doubly certain."

"There were signs of a struggle, then?" asked Prince John.

"His clothes prove as much," answered Chief Paulette, with a slight nod that way when the hands of the surgeon once more

deftly restored those garments to seeming order.

Prince John could see as much for himself, now. The coat was torn on the right breast, and across one arm, the last rent being of irregular shape, as though the arm had been violently torn away from a savage hand-clutch.

As Prince John drew back from making this final examination, Chief Paulette gave a signal which was readily interpreted by the Special, and Prince followed that official as he turned and went back to his office.

Neither man spoke again until the door was closed and they were seated. Then John Prince asked:

"Will you kindly tell me just how this ugly affair came about, sir?"

The ghost of a smile flitted across that grave face, but he took the question as it was meant, not as it was worded.

"There is not so very much more to tell, as yet, Mr. Prince, but you are entirely welcome to that little," he began, gravely. "The body was first discovered by one of my men, a patrolman."

"Then the quarrel was not heard by an officer?"

"No, else the deed would have been reported much earlier. The man had been dead long enough for the blood to stiffen over his wounds."

Chief Paulette went on to describe just how and just where the body had been found, adding that the officer sent in a call, which found him at the office, though so much after his customary hour for retiring.

"I had a good bit of extra work to look over, but I'm not sorry I was so detained," added the chief. "It saved time, for I was next at the scene, and—well, of course I took a careful view of both body and its surroundings before permitting removal."

An eye-flash came to Prince John at this sentence, for he fancied its meaning was clear. Yet he asked:

"Did you find anything which could cast light on the killing, sir?"

"Nothing—unless you count *this* as a bit of evidence," coolly answered Chief Paulette, his right hand moving far enough forward to place an article of jewelry on the corner of his desk where the Insurance Detective was sitting.

This article was clearly masculine, and as Prince John leaned forward to examine without touching, he gave vent to a low, half-startled exclamation.

He saw a scarf-pin, the head of which was shaped after the Egyptian Sphinx, and cunningly carved out of a tiger eye stone.

"Look at it closer, please," said Chief Paulette, softly as to tones, but with an almost vivid light gleaming in his blue eyes the while. "See if you can recall anything like this, will you, Mr. Prince?"

More to cover his wish for time than through a lingering doubt, the detective complied by picking up the pin, turning it slowly back and forth to watch the shifting yellow lights.

"You have seen a pin like this, have you not, Mr. Prince?"

"I believe I have—yes!" with decision, as he replaced the Sphinx-head on the desk. "I have seen this very pin, or its mate, sir."

"When, and where?"

"Herman Richter wore just such a pin in his scarf while being examined as to his knowledge concerning that abortive attempt to fire the store where he was employed as head-bookkeeper," distinctly replied the detective, resolved to leave no room for doubting his full meaning.

There was a brief pause; then the officer gravely said:

"You asked me if I found anything which could point toward the assassin, Mr. Prince; I found this scarf-pin close beside the body of Gerald Quayle, and called attention to the article before touching it."

"Might it not have been lost by Quayle himself, during his fight for life with the assassin, sir?"

"Would he be likely to wear *two* pins?" with a faint smile briefly lighting up his grave visage. "There is a pin—horseshoe, diamond nails—now in the scarf worn by the corpse, Mr. Prince."

"Then my guess don't fit," frankly ad-

mitted the detective. "But, somehow, I can't for the life of me make it seem right that Herman Richter would or could do such a deed as this!"

"I hate to think that way myself, sir, since I turned the young man loose on my own responsibility," gravely said the official, his brows wrinkling with a troubled frown the while. "Still, that pin! It almost certainly is the identical one worn by young Richter this day just gone, and unless he can fully account for this—well!"

"That means you intend arresting him for killing Quayle?" bluntly asked the Special as the other cut himself short.

"Wait, please," with a sudden return to his customary imperturbable manner, his face losing all signs of trouble or human feeling, it might almost be added. "I can't say just now what I may or may not do. For one thing, I am momentarily expecting the arrival of Mr. Bantry Quayle, and much depends on *his* wishes, you comprehend?"

Prince John made no answer to this half query, for just then there came a swift foot-fall, and a gentle tapping at the office door.

"Open," called forth the chief.

The door swung open part way, and the pale, grave face of the surgeon showed itself. He quietly uttered:

"Another gentleman, chief."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Quayle, the officer says. Shall I—"

"I'll come. Don't let him in where the body is until I've had a word with him first, please."

As though nothing could make him forget his politeness, Chief Paulette begged the detective to pardon his desertion, promising to return as speedily as possible, when they could terminate their business more at their leisure.

Prince John was left alone with his thoughts, and was willing enough to be excused from witnessing that tragic meeting of father and son.

As it was, he caught one shrill, agonized cry as human nature got the better of will and training; and sitting there, staring at vacancy, the Insurance Detective could see if all, in fancy.

He had other thoughts, too; thoughts of the German over whose head one heavy charge already hung, as by a hair. And now—this murder!

It could hardly be *less* than murder, since the dead man bore wounds in rear as well as in front. Yet—

"I can't recall *his* face as he stood there telling his story, and make it seem possible that Richter would do such a deed, viciously though Quayle did assail him, over yonder!"

Prince John was still mentally debating that knotty point, in which the tiger-eye Sphinx cut a prominent figure, when the door opened to admit Chief Paulette, and with him Bantry Quayle.

The old man showed how terribly that blow had affected him, and in nothing so much as his hoarse, muffled tones when he spoke:

"Arrest him! Arrest Herman Richter, I say! He killed my—oh, why must I be thrice-accursed like this!"

And then, again fighting back his intense emotion, Bantry Quayle repeated his demand that Herman Richter be arrested for killing his son, Gerald Quayle.

CHAPTER XVI.

ARRESTED FOR MURDER.

THE sun had hardly shown its face to San Francisco when that arrest was made, and Herman Richter was hurried off to jail, seemingly stunned too seriously to make even a verbal defense.

The warrant under which he was arrested had been sworn out by Bantry Quayle, and gave willful murder as the principal charge.

Possibly that name had much to do with so stunning the German, for was not his accuser the father of the maiden whom he loved so passionately, and whom he hoped one day to make his wife?

Prince John had taken no part in the arrest, although he knew in advance the warrant was to be served as speedily as might be.

For one thing, the service was out of his limit, and for another he was far from satis-

fied that a serious mistake was not being made, even if a grave injustice was not being imposed upon the German.

To the exclusion of all other business, this matter occupied the mind of the Insurance Special, and knowing from past experience that he would hardly feel fit for other work unless he disposed of this, as far as practicable, he applied for a permit at an early hour of the day, resolved to call on the prisoner, if he did nothing more important.

Thanks to his peculiar relations with Chief Paulette, Prince John found little difficulty in securing permission to remain with the prisoner as long as he saw fit; and only lingering to attend to a few preliminaries relating to his main business there in Frisco, the detective presented his card and the permit at the city jail, quickly finding admission to the cell where Herman Richter was sitting, bent almost double, with face hidden in his joined palms.

He made no stir, no sign as Prince John stepped inside the cell, nor did the clang of the metal door serve to arouse him. He seemed lost to all outward sounds in his utter misery and distress.

But when Prince John uttered his name, in kindly tones, then the spell was broken, and the prisoner looked up, his haggard face showing discolored marks as of a human fist!

"Devil! Hound! Is it not enough to brand one like this, without following the foul blow up with your thrice-accursed presence?" the German harshly cried, face flushing and form swelling.

"If I come as a friend, Richter?"

"A friend? *You?* As well expect the wolf to befriend the lamb!"

"Yet I stood your friend only yesterday, when a single word from my lips would have sent you to a place like this," calmly said the detective. "Or I could have done that same by merely sealing my lips. Instead of that—shall I recall what I said in your defense, then, Richter?"

That grave, gentle, yet authoritative tone even more than the words uttered, served to recall the prisoner to reason; and when this much was accomplished, the larger half was won.

It did not take much longer for Prince John to convince the German that he was fairly confident this, as well as the less dangerous charge of attempted arson, was wronging him; and after that the poor fellow was almost as wax in the deft hands of the mold!

Not until he was satisfied Richter was collected enough to say nothing save what he fully believed or could back up with proofs, would Prince John permit him to talk about this crime; for crime it surely was, although the Insurance Detective asserted his firm belief that the assassin was yet at liberty.

"I feel confident that *you* had nothing whatever to do with the killing, Richter," he added. "But that Gerald Quayle was killed is one certain fact, and another is—when did you lose your scarf-pin?"

Herman Richter instinctively lifted a hand to his throat, but he showed no trace of uneasiness as he found the pin gone.

"I don't know. Did I have it on?"

"While at the store you did, yesterday. A tiger-eye, carved to represent the head of an Egyptian Sphinx. Did you wear that pin last night, Richter?"

"I think—it may be so. I have others, but that—yes, I must have worn it last night if you saw me have it on, yesterday."

He spoke mechanically, indifferently, even, but Prince John would far rather have it thus than see anything like nervousness on that score.

"I said there was a second fact which could not be doubted, you may remember, Richter, and that is—your Sphinx-head pin was found by the police, on the spot where lay the corpse of Gerald Quayle!"

Richter gave a low cry and violent start at this speech, for even his wits were not sufficiently dazed to hinder his realizing what a damning bit of evidence that discovery might prove.

"I never harmed him! Before God and high heaven I swear I never harmed Gerald Quayle, even when he assaulted me like—"

"Careful, man!" sharply warned the detective, with an apprehensive glance toward

the door, through the narrow grating of which he could catch an occasional glimpse of the slowly pacing warder.

More than all else this warning cry convinced the prisoner that the Special had visited him as a friend, rather than as an enemy; and gaining composure from that assurance, he gave a brief account of the quarrel which had been forced upon him by Gerald Quayle the evening before.

He still further explained this by frankly admitting his love for Norah Quayle, and how it came about that he had paid a visit to the house where the chances were so great that he would fall into fresh trouble.

Not until he had made all this perfectly clear to the friendly detective did Herman Richter again allude to his tiger-eye pin, but then he suggested a possible solution:

"He handled me roughly, sir, because I would not fight her brother, any further than to save myself as much as might be. And so—my coat was torn, my throat was sore—see!" with quivering finger calling attention to face and to neck.

"And that must have been the way: I lost my pin then! And *he*—it may have stuck to his clothes, unseen by his eyes. And then—eh?"

Prince John bowed his understanding, although his face showed very little lighting; possible, but hardly plausible, this solution!

"Something like that must have happened, or else this pin is merely similar to the one you have worn," he said, then adding, slowly: "And after you left the house of Mr. Quayle: you can recall all that passed, so far as your movements are concerned, of course?"

The prisoner passed a hand slowly across his face, like one trying to brush away a troublesome mist; but then he slowly shook his head.

"What?" almost harshly ejaculated the detective, as he involuntarily recalled that former extraordinary plea. "Surely you *can*, man alive! Where did you go after leaving that house?"

"I walked—walked—walked! I was like one on fire, here, and here!" smiting first his breast, then his forehead. "And so—I was crazy-wild, it seems like, now!"

"Which direction did you turn first?"

"Here, there, everywhere! All I know is that I *could not stop*; I must keep in motion or I would go mad! And so—it is like that, sir; I was walking far—out of town—in the sand-hills—down by the bay—all over!"

"Didn't you see anybody? Didn't you speak to or was spoken by any person? *Think*, man, for unless we can show where you were during those hours of last night between your leaving that house and the discovery of his corpse, you'll hang for murdering Gerald Quayle, sure as guns!"

Herman Richter shook his head despondently. All was a blank, so far as he could recall at the present time.

"It is useless, sir. I cannot remember. I was walking, far out of town. I can swear to that much; but anything further—any positive proof as to where I spent nearly all of last night, is out of my reach."

And this, in fine, amounted to what the Insurance Detective was able to gather; not nearly enough to clear the accused of that terrible crime, yet even now Prince John felt convinced that Herman Richter had not taken part or lot in the killing of Gerald Quayle.

Hoping that the prisoner's memory would turn clearer after a reasonable length of time had elapsed, Prince John turned his wits to another possible solution of that murder.

He questioned Herman Richter guardedly enough as to the social relations of the Quayles, and particularly the daughter. Had she other suitors for her hand in marriage?

"Noble Featherkyl, for one," came the unexpected answer. "But *he* would never have harmed poor Gerald. They were good friends, always."

After some close questioning on this point, Prince John let the matter drop, evidently satisfied that the right solution of that death mystery must be looked for elsewhere.

Next, he questioned Richter as to Bernard Dussing, and others of the old Liberty Bund of Chicago days, learning that besides the man named there were quite a number of the old gang now in Frisco.

"Then right there's the quarter we've got to press our investigations in, my hearty!" cried the Insurance Special with enthusiasm, real or admirably feigned. "This killing is only part of the fire-trap game, don't you see, man, dear?"

"Then you think?" hesitatingly asked the prisoner.

"I *know* that the old gang had it in for you when you gave such frank and honest evidence on the witness-stand there in Chicago, Richter. To *your* testimony, more than any other one thing, I owed their conviction then. And now—the rest of the old gang is trying to play even with you, old fellow!"

Slowly but surely the German brightened up, rallying both wits and courage under that genial influence. He began to see how the cruel toils might have been spun around him by those one-time associates, and the longer Prince John argued the point, the clearer it seemed to grow.

"There's only one way left open for you to foil their devilish little game, Richter, and that is by fighting fire with fire!"

"You mean—what *do* you mean, my good friend?"

"That if you will tell me all you know about these fire-bugs, bomb-throwers, anarchists—to quote poor Quayle—I'll engage to clear your name and fame in the eyes of all the world—and a certain fair young lady in particular!"

Prince John spoke with daring assurance, but he felt fully justified in so doing, knowing as he did, through past experience, how difficult a matter it would be to win this man over to even seeming treachery to those he had once associated with on brotherly terms.

It required more than one such appeal to win Richter fairly over, but when once fully convinced that the old gang was trying to ruin him for life, if not condemning him to the gallows, the German yielded; and drawing close together so that not a syllable could possibly be caught by any listening ears outside of their own, he told Prince John all he knew of the Liberty Bund representatives now living in Frisco.

This was far more than the detective had even dared hope for, and at certain points of that whispered communication, his dark eyes fairly flashed fire, so strong grew his interest.

Once or twice he begged Richter to repeat his words, the more perfectly to impress them upon his memory; but then, after the lapse of almost two hours since his admission, Prince John rose to his feet, warmly clasping the prisoner's hands, cheerily speaking:

"When I call again, to-morrow, I hope to have something of importance to show as gains. Until then—brace up, and hope on!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FIRE-BUGS IN SESSION.

THAT very day was to bear witness to the correctness of the Insurance Detective's belief that at least a section of the old Liberty Bund had gathered here in San Francisco, and was now in full working order.

In obedience to a call which none save the fully initiated could comprehend, the members of that nefarious association began to gather at the rendezvous named; one of several, all of which were made use of as the leading spirit of the gang thought advisable.

This rendezvous proved to be the same building to which Ivan Petroff, the Russian dynamiter, had hurried immediately after his savage attempt at assassinating Prince John and Fire-chief Orson McAleney.

Twilight had hardly fallen before the most eager of that company obeyed the symbolic summons of their master, but those ardent ones knew they would have to wait for the coming of him to whom they paid allegiance, which they seemed perfectly willing to do, so long as they were supplied with liquor and tobacco.

Now, as on that prior occasion, the front entrance was closed, barred and chained, with a watchful guardian hard by whose sworn duty it was to answer no summons unless it came in regular order, nor to admit any who might give the correct signal, unless

he or they could fairly "work their way in" under word, sign and grip.

Within, matters seemed much as they had on the evening when Ivan Petroff came with his jubilant song of destruction and annihilation; the gathering was considerably larger, but the apartment was just as blue with smoke, as rank with disagreeable odors as then.

There was one notable difference, however. Then each man present had worn nothing in the way of disguise, while now every face was securely hidden by a black cloth mask, fashioned somewhat after the style made notorious by the "Ku Klux Klan" of reconstruction days.

Not only the face, but head and all was covered by the black hood, leaving only voice or shape by which the wearers might be recognized even by their intimate friends and fellow members.

Those now assembled seemed on a perfect equality with each other, now listening, now interrupting, calling each other by name as the occasion arose.

All this might have been expected from an association which was heralded by the title of "Liberty Bund," and which distinctly preached equality of man; yet that even these beings acknowledged a master, a higher power, one whose voice was lifted in full authority over them, was amply proven by a simple circumstance; near the rear of that fairly spacious apartment was a chair, draped in flaming red, placed upon a low dais.

And, despite all their free and easy manners, not one of that assembly touched or seated himself in that chair, nor was it passed by without a silent salute, as of respectful submission.

On this evening, as on that previous one, Ivan Petroff was not to be numbered among the earliest arrivals, but when he did put in an appearance, his face and eyes seemed to herald startling tidings, even before his nimble tongue could fairly fall to work.

"You have heard, brothers?" he cried out, hardly waiting for the door to close behind him. "The devils of police have pounced upon our noble brother, and now—"

"Order! The face, brother!" interrupted several of the band, in concert, "Cover—cover—cover!"

Instead, the Russian tossed back his long locks, laughing in scorn as a hand passed caressingly down his magnificent beard.

"Bah! Let those who fear wear the mask, but that is not Ivan, son of Peter! Shall he hide from his friends, when he never yet veiled his face from look of enemy?"

"It is the law, and—"

"Who dares to uphold the law? *We* are the law! I am my *own* law, and myself to myself grants absolution from any such foolish rule. So—something to drink, to smoke, for Ivan, son of Peter and Pauliska!"

Evidently enough the bomb-thrower had already been paying his devotions to the shrine of Bacchus, and as he was popularly credited with being "a bad man" to cross on such occasions, his present companions made no further attempt to have him conform with the general custom, one or two hinting that all would be different as soon as "the master" should put in an appearance.

Almost as a matter of course there was a saloon in close connection with this anarchistic rendezvous, from whence all calls for drinks or smoking materials were promptly answered, by a waiter who belonged to the order, and who was the only other person who did not wear a mask.

This attempt to make him conceal his face threw the Russian off the line he had marked off before entering, it seemed, since he made no immediate allusion to the arrest of which he had been so full.

Talk was resumed, and almost as a matter of course it touched upon those events which would naturally hold the strongest interest for men of their caliber: the Dussing fire, the sensation at the store of Quayle & Co. the doings of police and the Fire Department in general.

Then mention was made of the killing of Gerald Quayle, and taking fire at once, the Russian broke forth with the words:

"A just deed—a most noble stroke, my brothers! And now—what of the gallant lad who dealt that blow?"

"You mean Herman Richter, Ivan?"

"Ay! Who else, since the son of Peter

and Pauliska was not there? Who else of ye all would have dared strike so sure a blow for liberty, equality, annihilation to the aristocrats? Who—who but gallant Herman Richter?"

A feeble cheer greeted this speech, more remarkable for volume of sound than either eloquence or cogency; but none other joined the half-drunken brother, while more than one surly growl bore different testimony from that given by the bomb-thrower.

"A cur! A traitor! What did he say when put on the witness-stand in Chicago? Curses cover Herman Richter from crown to sole!"

With the keynote thus struck, others took up the cry against the blond German, and for the next minute or two Ivan Petroff could do little more than glare indignantly from face to face as threats, curses, accusations were poured forth against the recreant brother of liberty.

If the company really wished to win the bomb-thrower over to their side, they were taking the wrong course, for the hotter flew their curses against the German, the warmer the Russian waxed in his defense. And in the end Petroff won his chance to speak out in defense.

"It is easy to say, easy to talk, but when it comes to action—ha! where is another to match my little Dutchman? Who else among ye all has written the red sign upon one of these million-times accursed aristocrats? Who among all of ye has dared lift the pretty steel against one of these nobles?"

"And where is Richter now?" sneeringly demanded one of the band.

"Where glory led him, where duty ought to lead us!" quickly answered the bomb-thrower, his face lit up, his eyes all aglow with fanatical enthusiasm. "In prison, dragged there by the devil-dogs of police! And now—I appeal to ye, brothers, as brethren in fact as well as in name! And now—to the rescue, brothers!"

Ivan Petroff sprang to his feet and wildly waved an empty beer-mug above his head, but the fine effect of the action was somewhat marred by his tripping over a careless or a malicious foot, falling headlong to the dirty floor, amidst a mocking burst of laughter.

But it took more than a trifle to wholly disconcert the Russian, and after venting a sonorous oath or two upon the owner of the foot, the bomb-thrower regained his own footing, and again burst into speech, fluent if not eloquent.

No words were too weighty, no terms too extravagant to express his intense admiration for the man who had sacrificed one of the wealthy aristocrats, one of the oppressors of the poor, one of the class upon whom the Liberty Bund had placed its stamp of annihilation.

"And now—where is he, our gallant brother? Lying in the loathsome prison cell! Racked with torture, weighted down to utter helplessness with chains, subjected to the taunts, the jeers, the blows and kicks of those imps of the head devil, Virgo Paulette!"

"There, my brethren, there ye may see my gallant hero! And now I ask ye, one and all, how much longer must it last? When shall the blow be dealt that shall be felt clear around this mighty globe?"

"Who's to strike that mighty blow, Petroff?"

"Who, do ye ask? Who but Ivan, son of Peter and Pauliska, lacking one more worthy that honor!"

"What with: a beer-mug, is it, brother?"

An almost general laugh greeted this broad sally, but the sounds of the mirth instantly died away as the Russian, with a vicious oath, thrust one hand into his bosom to draw forth a ball-like article, and there was an instinctive shrinking away on their part as he shook that hand above his head as though about to cast the bomb into their midst.

"With this, brothers!" the fanatic cried, more wild-eyed than ever, now, it seemed. "With this—mate to the bomb that has already been heard all around the globe!"

"Careful, brother! What do you intend doing, then?"

"Sending that devil's den in fragments to the skies! I—even I, brothers! I will blow up the city jail and rain death and destruc-

tion over one half this City of Sodom! I will—"

With a sure, carefully calculated clutch, one of the fire-bugs fastened upon that recklessly handled bomb, taking it from Ivan's grasp without a struggle, so well was the trick timed.

And then, with that peril removed, the fire-bugs took their turn, now openly denouncing Herman Richter as a traitor to the cause he had once solemnly sworn to maintain with heart, brain and hand.

"It is better so, yet it would be better still if the police had killed while taking," sternly declared one of the masked speakers.

"We cannot call ourselves safe so long as Herman Richter can talk. Remember, brothers, the dastardly record he left behind him in Chicago!"

"Who but he gave information to the police, then?"

"What right had he to use fire-trap without orders or permission from the master?"

"The right all poor men have to despoil the capitalists!" roared the bomb-thrower, rallying again. "Anything—everything—all things are right that work injury or death to the accursed aristocrats!"

"Who among ye all has done more to further our loved cause than gallant Herman Richter? Who can show a red right hand, freshly soaked in the heart's blood of our infernal oppressors? And so—I say it once more, brothers! Herman Richter must and shall be set at liberty, if I have to do the work my single self!"

"If so eager for work, why not expend a portion of your energy in removing that devil, John Prince?"

"Have I not made one such attempt?" retorted the bomb-thrower. "I stand ready to try again, although failure means almost certain death to me."

"Trying is not doing, brother."

"Who else among ye all has dared do as much, even if I did fail?" fiercely cried the anarchist, looking more like a demon than a human being in his fiery rage.

Before an answer could be shaped, or he could say more, there came a well-known signal from beyond that closed door, an instant silence fell over the assembly, for they knew their master was drawing near.

The door opened, to permit the passage of a masked and cloaked figure, which paused at the threshold, seemingly scanning each other figure there present, before fairly entering the room.

The fire-bugs bowed in greeting to their master, silently, but with a respectful unanimity of action which was just a little odd, coming as it did from those who so rabidly denounced all servitude, advocating the perfect equality of mankind.

Bowing silently in acknowledgment of this recognition, the cloaked figure passed on down the long apartment, approaching that scarlet draped throne as one who inherits the right to the distinction.

Stepping upon the low dais, The Master (to give him the title by which he was universally recognized while the fire-bugs were in called session), turned to again slowly inspect his followers, one and all of whom were standing now, plainly awaiting his pleasure.

Of them all, only Ivan Petroff was without a mask, and his face was pale and uneasily twitching when those gleaming eyes seemed to linger longest upon his person.

Still in perfect silence, The Master seated himself in the red-wrapped chair, then slowly lifted one gloved hand, making a slight gesture which sent a stir through all that assembly.

"Ivan Petroff!" uttered The Master, in a strongly nasal tone of voice.

"Present, Master," responded the bomb-thrower.

"Ivan Petroff, advance to the bar, and give an account of yourself," coldly added the chief of the fire-bugs.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CHIEF OF THE FIRE-BUGS.

The Russian flinched perceptibly, but only for an instant. Then he rallied his nerve sufficiently to move forward, guided by that gloved hand until he stood in front of the red throne, his head bowed, his hands crossed over his chest.

"In what have I sinned, Master?" huskily asked the bomb-thrower, now presenting a pitiful contrast to his former arrogant demeanor.

"In breaking the laws by which Liberty Bund is governed, Ivan Petroff," coldly asserted the chief of the fire-bugs.

"I never—not guilty, Master!" hastily pleaded the accused, then adding: "If any person has dared—"

The Master cut him short, with both gesture and voice.

"Guilty, first, of breaking the unwritten rules, and now of adding a lie to the original sin—disobedience. Why are you without a mask, Ivan Petroff?"

The Russian gave a little start and audible gasp at this, for he had expected something far worse than this, it seemed. And encouraged by the thought that, after all, his so-called sin was but a trifle, the bomb-thrower lifted head and eyes, speaking in a more natural tone of voice:

"Because, Master, I am not afraid or ashamed to let the light fall upon my natural face. And then," hastily, "the Bund was not in session, yet."

"You are wrong, Ivan Petroff, and your plea is rejected. The Bund is in session from the instant this hand sends forth the call for a meeting. This much you surely know?"

"I did not know—"

"That is no valid excuse, Ivan Petroff. And, even if your plea was to be accepted, what would it prove?"

"That I meant no wrong, Master. I am not a coward to—"

"Stop, Ivan Petroff!" with increased sternness. "I have heard of your making just such brags before this, and now it is time to reach a final understanding. But, first, as to your claim that you fear not the light of day falling upon your face!"

"Your making that boast so often, as well as your leaving off your mask, Ivan Petroff, is a proof of cowardice instead of courage. A truly brave man does not find it necessary to make an empty show of daring, after your fashion."

The bomb-thrower shifted uneasily on his feet, but his head remained bowed, and his attitude that of humility before a justly offended superior.

All around was silence, but if forms remained motionless, eyes could shift sufficiently to interchange glances of grim pleasure over the humiliating lesson being read their overbearing brother.

Evidently the Master meant to make a thorough job of it, once he had taken hold of the matter, for he showed no signs of relenting now that his discipline had fairly made itself felt.

"You have been spoiling for a lesson of this description for a long time past, Ivan Petroff," he said, after a pause which could hardly be called a respite for the one on trial.

"And now—once for all!"

"You have been a member of the Liberty Bund for years, Ivan Petroff, hence you are debarred from pleading ignorance of the laws and rules by which our noble brotherhood is governed, both in and out of session."

"I will make amends—I will transgress no more, Master!" huskily declared the fire-bug, his head bowing still lower.

"I mean to leave you no excuse for transgressing, Ivan Petroff," the chief said, his strong nasal tones sounding stronger than ever. "I have delayed bringing you to the bar, in full session, until further delay on my part would lay me open to impeachment for neglect of duty. So—listen, Ivan Petroff!"

"It is not alone your disregard of the rules which prescribe masked faces whenever the Bund is called in session. That would simply show you up as one so nearly a coward that he felt it necessary to assume a risk in order to prove his daring."

The culprit shuddered as he listened, for those coldly measured tones cut to the quick, and the punishment was vastly intensified by the knowledge that one and all of the brothers over whom he had so arrogantly lorded it on countless occasions, were hearing and enjoying this verbal castigation.

"You have sinned even more seriously outside of the hall, than you have transgressed within its walls. For instance—who

ordered or authorized you to throw that bomb the other night?"

Ivan Petroff started at that abrupt question, but rallying, he made answer in fairly steady tones:

"I saw the chance, Master, and—I accepted it."

"What chance?"

"The chance of ridding the Bund of two of the most dangerous enemies we have: the fire-chief, and that devil of a detective, John Prince!"

"Why didn't you make a better job of it, then?" sneeringly demanded the chief of the fire-bugs.

"I did the very best I knew, Master."

"And—*failed!* Failed to harm our enemies but gave them yet another powerful weapon to hold over our heads. That is it, Ivan Petroff! You yield to crazy impulse, no doubt meaning well enough, but lacking nerve or coolness sufficient to make your strokes count as they ought."

"This is why I pronounce you guilty, Ivan Petroff, and why I have brought you to the bar in open session. You must learn to wait for orders before acting on behalf of the Liberty Bund, from this time on."

"You may go, now. Put on your mask, brother."

In silence the Russian bomb-thrower bowed low, then backed away to a respectful distance from that red throne before producing his hood of black cloth, inside of which his head and face meekly vanished.

For nearly a minute silence reigned throughout that smoke-dimmed room, the gleaming eyes of the Master passing from shape to shape, as though searching for another culprit who deserved a lesson.

If so, he found none, for when his nasal tones came again, they spoke of a matter which concerned all of the fire-bugs alike.

"Brothers, I have summoned you to gather here in regular session, because the time has come when we have got to fall to work in deadly earnest, or else suffer pretty much the same fate that overtook the Liberty Bund in Chicago!"

A stir, a low muttering, then the fire-bugs stood motionless once more, yet plainly anxious for those masked lips to speak still more openly, that they might know just what manner of danger menaced them now.

"You have already had a hint that trouble was on the way brothers, when that cipher came to us from one of the faithful on the other slope; but now—the trouble is here!"

"Fire-chief Orson McAleney has been heard to declare that the burning of Bernard Dussing's store was caused by an incendiary!"

"He lies, the devil!" almost screamed the man whose name had last been mentioned, his clinched fists wildly gesticulating until the master lifted a silencing hand, sternly speaking:

"Quiet, brother! Quiet, and subside. Saying is not proving, and the burden of proof surely rests with the insurance companies who have policies written on that building and stock of goods."

"Still, we must not remain idle while the enemy is so vigorously at work, by night as well as by day. We must be up and doing, unless we are ready to succumb without so much as a fight. Are we, brothers?"

"No! Never! Fight—burn and kill! Down with the bloodhounds of law and order! Death to all aristocrats!"

Grimly silent, the Master sat watching and listening to the vicious storm his cunningly chosen words had set in motion, and though his face was hidden behind that sable mask, he surely enjoyed the situation.

When he deemed enough steam had been worked off, the Master lifted a gloved hand by way of commanding silence, and his wonderful power was made evident by the swift obedience which was yielded. One instant a yelling, howling, cursing pack of demons; the next, quiet, motionless, waiting for the next move to be made by this master-hand.

"I believe that this detective, John Prince, who wrought the Bund so serious an injury at Chicago, and Chief McAleney, have put their heads together to shape a devilish plot by means of which they hope to excite against us the very worst passions of a mob such as only Frisco can collect for death and assassination! And I further believe that the

real or pretended attempt to fire the store of Quayle & Co., of which the papers are making such a terrible to-do, is part and parcel of that plot!"

"And Herman Richter?" ventured one of the fire-bugs.

"Has been arrested on that charge, of course, but—"

So far the chief of the fire-bugs spoke, but then broke abruptly off, like one who fails to find just the words he thinks ought to be used in that connection.

By this time Ivan Petroff had recovered in good part from the lesson which had been administered him, and now seeing an opening by utilizing which he might even more than reinstate himself in the good graces of their Master, the bomb-thrower broke forth:

"And about Herman Richter, Master, I say now what I said before: It belongs to our solemn oath to liberate our gallant brother, and I, for one, am both ready and eager to play my part, no matter how difficult or dangerous that part may be!"

"You are ready to act, you say, Ivan Petroff?" slowly asked the chief.

"Ready and willing, Master!" came the prompt response.

"What would you dare do, brother?"

"Anything the Master might command. I will use bomb, bullet, steel: fire—anything and everything! Only—let the Master command, and Ivan will perform!"

There was something of bombast in all this, as a matter of course, yet even one so reckless with his tongue as the Russian bomb-thrower, would hardly offer to do more than he dared attempt, so soon after being publicly reprimanded.

Evidently the chief reasoned along this line, for he showed no signs of impatience or incredulity, but gazed keenly at that boldly-erect figure for a few seconds in silence.

Then he spoke again:

"You would act, even though the duty I owe the band over which I now preside, should force me to say—*slay?*"

"Still Ivan would obey, Master."

"No matter what might be the risk to yourself, Petroff?"

"That is for the Master to look after," with a slight shrug of his powerful shoulders.

"What do you mean by that, brother?"

"That the Master would not command a death without feeling that death was strictly essential to the welfare of the Bund," coolly explained the bomb-thrower. "And, such being the case, the Master would not order Ivan to attempt aught which could not be accomplished by one man."

"You are right, brother," admitted the chief, with a grave bow. "If I bid you slay, I will see that the life is laid open for your finger to touch. Now—if I should conclude to say that word?"

"Ivan would obey his Master."

"No matter at whose life my finger might point?"

"No matter, Master. If your finger points at the life of my father, or my mother—he or she—dies the death!"

"Or—if that life belongs to a brother?" slowly asked the chief, with a peculiar emphasis which caused the Russian to start in amazement. "Would that fact make any change in your faith, Ivan Petroff?"

CHAPTER XIX.

ONE LIFE WORTH LESS THAN MANY.

LIKE most of his class, the Russian dynamiter was full of a certain low-grade cunning, and the manner rather more than those words themselves caused him to suspect another trap lying behind; but he had gone too far not to go further, and with only a shade of hesitation, he answered:

"Not with Ivan Petroff, Master. Where the finger points, there the blow shall fall!"

"No matter what difficulties or dangers lie in the path?"

"No matter, Master. If they are too great for one man to overcome, they are not too much for one man to attempt, under orders."

The bomb-thrower spoke like one who fully meant all that passed his lips, but even

now the chief of the fire-bugs seemed to hesitate before making his full meaning perfectly clear.

This fact, instead of alarming the dynamiter, apparently lent him a greater degree of nerve, since he now took the initiative, saying:

"Brother by blood, or brother by oath, Master, the doomed one has a name? Is it too much to ask for that?"

"Herman Richter!"

Although the leading up had been such as to in goodly measure discount this announcement, still there was something of a sensation when the Master pronounced the name of the German bookkeeper.

After all, Herman Richter had been one of their number. He had taken the same oaths, had shared in their secret work, had at one time been known far and wide, wherever that organization extended, as one of their best orators, one of their most popular speakers.

And now—death-doomed!

Ivan Petroff betrayed less emotion than many another there assembled, although it seemed as though his was to be the hand that was to cut short the life-thread of a brother—and a brother whom his fiery tongue had only now been defending and eulogizing in one and the same breath.

He bowed before the presiding officer, then calmly asked:

"When and how, Master?"

"Wait, brother," and the chief of fire-bugs made a sign before which the dynamiter fell back. "Be seated, Ivan Petroff."

In silence the anarchist obeyed, hardly knowing whether to rejoice or to regret. Still, he had done his level best to wipe out the former mistake he had fallen into, and must rest content with that.

"Before I say more on this point, brothers," spoke the chief after order was fully restored in obedience to his gesture, "perhaps it is as well to tell you all my full reasons for sending out the urgency call, this day."

"You all know that our deadly enemies are at work, hoping to crush to earth the remnant of the glorious Liberty Bund which escaped their diabolical snares three years ago, in Chicago."

"You all have heard mention of one John Prince, a human bloodhound, suborned by those damnable corporations, the allied Insurance Trusts! And some, if not all of you, know that he is now here in our very midst, working again the devil's traps, each one of which is baited with human life—the lives of our brothers, ourselves!"

"Death to the devil!" cried Ivan Petroff, unable to hold in longer.

Other voices made themselves heard, though in an ugly, growling mutter, rather than in articulate speech. But all was stilled again as the fire-bug chief lifted a gloved hand.

"It is not enough to *talk*, my brothers; we must *act!* Yet, before acting, we must know just what cause we have for fearing our enemies. And it is to make this clear as possible that I claim your strict attention now and here, brothers."

"This John Prince is a detective, working for the blood-money offered by the Insurance Trust. His pay is regulated by his success. And that means—what?"

"That means every and any method by which a bold, pitiless demon in the guise of man, can brand the most victims: little recks he whether guilty or innocent; all he asks, is there aught he can do to save his employers a dollar or two?"

"There is one way; let John Prince die!" sternly cried out the Russian bomb-thrower. "Then his masters need not pay him the blood-money he has already earned!"

The Master showed no impatience at an interruption of this order, and it was not until the dynamiter had his say, that he spoke again.

"It is clear, then, that this detective has come to Frisco on this mission: to investigate the fires which have happened, of late. And, to come down nearer the point, I have heard sufficient to prove that he now asserts, among those he believes are friendly enough to keep his secret, the Dussing fire was surely incendiary!"

One of the masked fire-bugs rose in his place and held up a hand.

"I recognize you, brother," said the chief. "What is it?"

"How could he even suspect such a thing, Master?"

"Was he not inside the building, brother?"

"Yes, and he saved the child when—after its life had been despaired of even by its parents," with a break in his voice denoting a greater degree of emotion than he cared to exhibit thus publicly.

"He declares that he saw enough while effecting that rescue, to feel confident the place was intentionally fired," added the chief.

"He lied, then!" came the fierce cry. "All was so far gone that no man could say aught like that!"

"No man who waits for a foundation of truth on which to base his accusations, better say, brother," cut in the Master, his nasal voice fairly ringing with fierce malice. "Is John Prince a man like that?"

"He is no man at all! Call him devil!" broke out Ivan Petroff.

"How could he even suspect that the fire was not purely accidental, Master?" persisted the other fire-bug, his very anxiety on that point sufficiently identifying him with the Dussing whose loss was called into question. "What could he possibly have seen or heard to make him think the fire was other than purely accidental?"

There was a slight pause after this agitated query, and the next words let drop by the presiding officer, but that hiatus only lent his speech greater meaning to those who heard.

"Unless your name or face too strongly recalled to his memory the Brooklyn fires, Bernard Dussing!"

The masked fire-bug recoiled a bit, but as quickly rallied:

"How could *that* matter, Master? I was not found guilty of anything wrong, *then*; and since then—"

"You were mixed up in that unfortunate affair, brother, and while there was no positive proof brought to light against you, the judge is on record as scoring you heavily as a probable participant. And that is handle sufficient for a human bloodhound like this detective: it gives him at least a shadow of evidence against you—and if through that baseless claim he can save the Insurance Trust the face of your honestly-paid-for policies, will he not make the most of it?"

"There is no proof—nothing then, nothing now!" persisted the incendiary, whose own tongue was surely convicting him of that crime. "I was set at liberty, for there was nothing for which the court could hold me, *then*. And *now*—am I not to be paid for my honest losses?"

"You never will be paid so long as there are such human hounds to swear black is white," coldly spoke the chief. "And in this case, there is not only the old record against your name, brother, but since John Prince passed clear through your store while it was burning, what is to hinder him from making oath to whatever his fancy dictates?"

"They will be lies—all lies, Master!"

"Of course. We know that, but are we the ones to decide? And then, as further proof to back up his charge of incendiarism, has he not that failure next door?"

"That devil of a Richter!" huskily cried out Bernard Dussing.

"Even so, who can prove that it was not part and parcel of the fire which destroyed the building and stock of goods on which *you* hold insurance papers, brother? Already that detective, and the head of the Fire Department are claiming that the failure was but part and parcel of the next-door success."

Bernard Dussing made a passionate gesture, but seemed at a loss for words which could even begin to do the subject justice.

"The failure at Quayle's place; who can explain that?" abruptly demanded the chief, with a fierce gesture of his gloved hand. "Who authorized Herman Richter to make any such attempt? I did not. The Liberty Bund did not. Then—*who* did?"

"Why should that attempt be made at all? We have no interest in the place. Neither father nor son ever belonged to *our* order. Not one penny of benefit would come to us through the destruction of build-

ing or contents, while now—what of harm must we expect?"

"Herman Richter is in jail," slowly spoke up one of the masked men. "He bore false evidence against the brotherhood once, when his liberty alone was endangered; what will he not say now that his very life seems at stake?"

"Thanks, brother," said the chief, with a bow toward the last speaker. "That is the point I have been leading up to; and now—listen!"

"Herman Richter acted wholly without orders or authority from this League. He acted entirely on his own responsibility, and had success rewarded his efforts, no doubt he would have hastened here to proclaim his vast merits as a smiter of the accursed autocrats."

"But—instead of success, failure came as his reward! He was so foolish-mad as to leave terribly strong proof against himself. And now that he has been arrested, with this detective hound to take a prominent part in the pinching, what will follow?"

"What followed his arrest at Chicago, Master?"

"We all know what part Herman Richter played *then*, and we all can give a fair guess at what will follow *now*! Herman Richter will tell all he knows—*more* than he knows, in fact! Unless—"

The chief of fire-bugs broke off here, but in this case silence was far more eloquent than speech, and not one of those attentive listeners there assembled but what could fill that hiatus aright.

Now, as before, it was left for Ivan Petroff to utter what others were surely thinking, and the dynamiter was nowise loth to grasp the opportunity.

He rose from his seat, and lifted a hand in regular order.

"I recognize you, brother," gravely acknowledged the Master.

"May I speak plainly, Master?"

"You have been recognized, brother, and that covers everything," was the grave response from the chair.

"Then—one life is worth less than many, Master!"

The Russian spoke slowly, distinctly, then bowed and took his seat.

Ivan Petroff was learning rapidly, it seemed! It was seldom he made so brief a speech, after winning the liberty, but it was even more rare for him to make such a successful one.

From those masked men came a low but energetic murmur, telling beyond the possibility of a doubt that they not only understood what lay at the core of that grim sentence, but heartily agreed with its animus.

The chief of fire-bugs likewise appeared to wholly approve of that speech, since he bowed toward the brother who was taking his seat, then gravely said:

"That is true, brothers, and hence I have said it: *Herman Richter must die before he talks too much for our good health!*"

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE RISK OF HIS LIFE.

PRINCE JOHN was not a man to waste much time when he saw a fair chance for making a stroke count in whatever case he might have on hand, and as a matter of course he did not neglect utilizing the valuable information which he had gathered from the lips of Herman Richter after winning the complete confidence of that unfortunate German.

Although Richter assured the detective that he had not actually rejoined the Liberty Bund, here in San Francisco, yet he was aware that the secret order was in working condition, and was still conducted as it had been in Chicago before the Insurance Special dealt it an almost fatal blow.

Among other things communicated by the prisoner, three different places of meeting were given, with directions how to enter them, as a member of the oath-bound society.

Then, too, the German told how a call for an extra meeting differed from the regular summons, and where those calls were posted in mystic signs which could tell nothing to the uninitiated, but which were where the brotherhood could readily see and interpret their meaning, thus doing away with the

trouble and even danger—through exciting suspicion of outsiders—of notifying each brother, singly.

As his main object in coming to San Francisco was to thoroughly expose and break up the gang of fire-bugs who masqueraded under the title of the Liberty Bund, Prince John eagerly drank in all these details, and never gave over until he had everything essential securely impressed upon his memory.

It was less a surprise to him than a fierce joy when the Insurance Special recognized one of the chalk figures freshly placed at one of the points named by Herman Richter, when he for the second time made his rounds for that particular purpose.

He knew now that an extra meeting had been called by one who had power to summon together the Liberty Bund members, and as he recalled the further instructions given him by the prisoner, Prince John knew at which one of those three regular places of meeting the fire-bugs were to assemble that very night.

This information was gained about the middle of the afternoon, and as the meeting was not to take place until after dark, according to all precedents, the detective had ample time for perfecting his arrangements.

For one thing, he paid another visit to the cell where Herman Richter was confined, and by showing the German a drawing of the chalk marks, confirmed the conclusions he had already drawn as to the time and place of meeting.

The prisoner seemed rather nervous over the matter, and more than once reminded the detective that he would be taking life in hand should he persist in his resolve to witness that meeting.

"That all belongs to the day's work, my dear fellow," coolly said the Special. "I've a heap sight more to win than to lose—"

"If discovered, you will lose your life, sir!"

"And if *not* discovered—which I have no intention of being, by the way—I will gain information which can be procured in no other manner. And so—I'm bound to take it all in, Richter!"

"You will hasten here to tell me, if all goes well, sir?"

"Rest assured I shall, Richter, for won't I owe it all to *you*, man, dear?" earnestly spoke the detective, gripping a hand warmly.

"And 'twill be owing to me if you are going to your death!"

"Well, if I fail to drop in here to-night, or by nine o'clock in the morning, Richter, just make a requisition on Fire-chief McAleney for sufficient of my funds to buy a mourning hat-band, for—well, *that* means I'll come if I can, and I surely can if life is left me!"

Laughingly the detective left his new-formed friend, and spent the few hours which intervened in completing his arrangements for the difficult as well as dangerous bit of work he so readily undertook.

Thanks to the careful instructions given him by Herman Richter after it was fully determined at which rendezvous the meeting was to be held, Prince John found that he was likely to have less difficulty as well as risk, provided nothing unforeseen should turn up to mar his programme.

Prince John was not one of those fabulous detectives who can, in less than half the twinkle of an active eye, so disguise himself as to require a personal introduction to himself before recognition is possible; but he knew how to alter his garb and carriage sufficiently to escape recognition from a passing eye, after dark, and this is what he did in the present case.

And, thanks to both his own coolness and the information given him by Herman Richter, Prince John was quite comfortably squatting in a dark room to the rear of the large apartment in which the fire-bugs were in session, with both eyes and ears fully employed.

His place of hiding was little better than a large closet, forming part of an addition to the main building, and which was not yet as fully finished as the remainder.

On his side, there was no plastering, and taking advantage of the noisy chatter which preceded the coming of the Master, Prince John easily enough cut holes through the

papered wall on the other side of that incomplete partition.

There was no door or other immediate communication between those two rooms, but a dark passageway led along one side of the main apartment, thus affording access to the small room, as well as to the back yard, by means of a door and narrow flight of stairs.

It was by means of this flight of steps and a skeleton key that the Insurance Detective gained his place of espial; and after that admission was once won, the rest seemed so easy as to be quite commonplace.

His covert was close, dark, inconvenient, while there was a strange, peculiar odor hovering around the closet-like space which Prince John vainly tried to account for to his own satisfaction.

But that was only during the prelude; after the coming on the scene of the fire-bug chief, all his attention was turned to the other room and its occupants.

Up to the time of that arrival, Prince John had seen but one face, that of the Russian anarchist, Ivan Petroff; a face which he had seen before coming to San Francisco, and one which belonged to a wild-eyed, half-crazy member of the Brooklyn and Chicago gang of anarchists.

In addition to this, Prince John believed he could single out two or three of his former court-acquaintances, but as all faces were masked by a close hood which necessarily changed each voice to a certain degree, of course he could not feel positive on that score.

After the chief put in an appearance, however, Prince John devoted by far the greater portion of his time and attention to that personage, trying his level best to "place" the man through voice, figure, or movements; but all in vain.

The voice itself was so peculiarly nasal in its notes that the detective at once pronounced it disguised, purposely; but then, as time and talk ran on, without the slightest alteration in that voice, he began to doubt the correctness of his first surmise.

"The devil himself couldn't act so perfectly for so long!" he inwardly declared. "And yet—such a peculiar tone! Once heard, it could not be forgotten, nor mistaken for any other. Then—if natural, and the fellow isn't deaf to his own tones, why don't he use something to disguise it?"

There was nothing remarkable about the chief's figure or formation to distinguish him from any one of a thousand others; he was of the average height, weight, build, and wearing a complete covering: mask, cloak, gloves: there was no single clue for the detective to fasten upon, save and except those oddly nasal tones.

Prince John was still working hard to recognize this mystery as some one whom he had met before, since he had been unable to win even a plausible clue from Herman Richter as to the actual identity of "The Master," but he did not neglect to hear and record all that was uttered by master and man, the while.

He made a mental note as to Bernard Dussing, and thus feeling perfectly sure that he could fasten grip upon at least two admitted members of that lawless gang, the detective paid no further attention to the other lesser lights, devoting his entire attention to the talk, and to the enthroned chief.

The Master had just declared the death-sentence upon Herman Richter, when a belated member, already masked like the rest, entered the room, making a sign after his regulation salute, which brought the words:

"Advance to the bar, brother!"

The new-comer stepped quickly forward, and pausing only when his foot touched that raised platform, he bent forward to whisper a few words into the ear which the chief inclined for that purpose.

Prince John saw the masked mystery give a slight start, as though this communication was anything but agreeable, but then he rallied, and for more than a minute whispers were swiftly exchanged by master and man, while the members of the lawless gang looked on in breathless suspense.

Presently the new-comer fell back to the front rank, where he stood in waiting while the chief spoke aloud:

"Very important tidings has been brought me by the brother, which interests us, one

and all, as you will freely admit when the proper time comes for me to pass the word on to the brothers in general. Just now—it is an emergency which calls for instant action on our part.

"All I need say to those whom I elect as companions for the worthy brother who has brought the information—Numbers Nine and Fifteen—is this: go with your leader, and when once where the work is to be done, do it like men!"

"Will you instruct the brothers further, or shall I?" asked the one whose coming had created such a sharp change of programme.

"You can do that, after leaving this house, and while on your way to the scene of action," promptly answered the chief, then making a gesture of dismissal while adding: "Obey your leader, brothers, and may complete success reward your efforts this night!"

Through all this Prince John listened and watched, feeling an uneasy sense of impending peril; but as the chief spoke on, his natural fears lessened until pretty much all he felt was a burning curiosity to hear what startling tidings had caused this sudden movement.

When the three picked men passed out by the door in front, the head fire-bug resumed his talk concerning Herman Richter, and the stern necessity there existed for putting an end to his life before he could work the Liberty Bund still worse injury through his too-free speech.

"It is mainly due to him that this fresh peril has arisen, brothers," the Master added, and Prince John fairly held his breath not to lose a single syllable of what might be coming. "Herman Richter has already betrayed his sworn brothers, broken his sacred oaths! And all for what?"

"Listen, and I will tell you just what words our faithful brother brought in haste to my ears, and then you can judge for yourselves whether or no I was justified in taking immediate action, without wasting too precious time in laying the matter before you in due form, to first receive your judgment."

More eagerly than ever was Prince John listening now, for surely he was on the point of making a ten-strike; and then—

Without a sound by way of warning, a crushing weight dropped upon his bowed back from above, crushing him half-stunned to the floor!

CHAPTER XXI.

JUDGED BEFORE HEARING.

PRINCE JOHN knew what sort of a trap had been sprung upon him, but that knowledge came too late to be of avail.

Through an opening in the ceiling directly above the spot where he was crouching, eagerly watching the fire-bugs and listening for the important tidings which he fancied the Master was about to communicate to that lawless band, one of those three picked men whom the detective had seen hurry off on a secret mission, leaped down upon the Insurance Spy.

Not a sound had come to warn the detective of his impending peril, and he could not have been taken at a more serious disadvantage.

Doubled up like a ball, his heavily shod feet striking first, Niccoli Vivaldi, the Snake Man, dropped squarely upon that bowed back, his weight fairly crushing the surprised eavesdropper to the floor, the shock in goodly measure paralyzing those powerful arms.

A sharp cry came from the Italian's lips, and he grappled viciously with the enemy whom he had so cunningly entrapped. Down alongside them dropped the other fire-bugs, and in answer to that sharp signal, the members in the larger apartment sprung into action, directed by a word from the lips of their chief.

Fully realizing his peril, Prince John struggled with all the power that crippling shock had left him; but sinewy arms and legs were wrapped around his body, strong hands were clutching his throat, plainly trying to smother all outcry which might possibly result in the coming of assistance from without that death-trap.

Then other hands came to back up the efforts put forth by the Human Serpent.

Still, despite his being taken so terribly at a disadvantage, the Insurance Special made a good fight, and those first few seconds were very interesting to the triad elected by the Master for that bit of important work, even though they hindered their human game from shouting forth an alarm, or from using any weapon.

Then—the general rush, headed by the chief of the fire-bugs!

With as many hands gripping him as could well fasten upon his person, Prince John was dragged along that dark passage and hurried into the lighted apartment where the fire-bugs had been in secret session.

His body might have taken that trip, but life would have been left behind, only for the repeated commands of the Master.

"Alive! Hold fast, but don't slay! Alive—keep him alive until he can be judged, brothers!"

No other voice would have found a hearing, or, if heard, would have been obeyed, just then. A spy, caught in the very act! Enough to turn all those men into demons of hate and revenge!

Stunned, breathless, unable to struggle longer, the Insurance Special was hustled into the hall, and when once under those lights, his limbs were quickly bound, under the immediate supervision of the Master, whose own gloved hands presently bound a silken handkerchief over that mouth, muffling yet not entirely gagging the detective.

Then, motioning his men to fall back a bit, the chief of the fire-bugs less hurriedly searched the person of their captive, removing all weapons, giving an oddly nasal laugh as he glanced over the brace of revolvers and short, stout bladed knife which were thus brought to light.

"A veritable desperado!" he said, mockingly, as he caught those dark eyes looking upward, already showing signs of rallying powers of mind if not of body as well. "A walking armory! And yet—too cowardly to use the tools he carries for show! Bah! I spit upon ye, dog of the devil!"

That was no mere figure of speech, for the action was suited to the words; but Prince John was powerless to resent the foul insult.

Other articles were taken possession of by the chief of fire bugs, every scrap of written or printed matter being jealously preserved for future reference, and that search terminating only when every possible hiding-place among those garments had been thoroughly inspected.

Through it all never a word came from the muffled lips of the detective. He had not yet entirely recovered from that benumbing shock, and was holding himself in reserve for an even more critical moment.

When fully satisfied that he had overlooked nothing which could prove of importance to himself or to the Liberty Bund, the Master retreated to his station, and when seated in that red-draped chair, spoke:

"Place the prisoner where he can see, hear, and be heard, brothers."

A wooden chair was quickly moved into the open space in front of the throne, and upon this the detective was placed by half a dozen willing hands.

"Shall we bind him fast, Master?" asked one of the fire-bugs.

"What use, brother? His feet are hampered against flight, and he can sit steadily there if he so likes. Should he fall—the floor will catch him!"

"Put a rope around his neck, and I'll play gallows-beam!" cried out the irrepressible dynamiter.

"Patience, brother," gravely spoke the chief, with an uplifting hand. "Who are we, to judge without hearing? Why should we say—"

"R A A I S."

In tones muffled and seemingly far away came that prolonged word, but to those who heard, there was naught of mystery in the sound; Prince John gave it utterance, and by no other combination of letters equally brief, could he so fully have expressed his sentiments concerning both speaker and speech.

An ominous sound came from the fire-bugs, but the chief flung up a hand with an imperious gesture, and silence reigned.

"Have you aught to advance as a plea for mercy, prisoner?"

"What use?" came the muffled answer. "Go on, if you think there's no hereafter!"

A brief pause, then the Master made a gesture which brought the Snake Man a little nearer the front.

"You have something to say, brother. How did you happen to discover this dog of a spy?"

"By a most lucky chance, Master," promptly answered the Italian. "As this chief may remember, I was very busy this day, about—"

"I remember," cut in the presiding officer. "Never mind that part of your story, brother, but come down to your truly fortunate discovery of this cur of Satan."

"I simply wished to explain why I happened to be late in keeping the rendezvous, Master," meekly offered the Man-snake. "And why, having been absent so long from my pets, I first paid my visit there."

"To the snake-den, you mean, brother?"

"Yes, Master. I knew my pets needed care, and so—while up there looking after their wants, then, I discovered—this dog of the devil!" with a swift gesture toward the Insurance Special.

"Through what lucky chance, brother?"

"It seemed just that, Master! What made me look down through that narrow crack beside the trap-door? That I know not, but look down I *did*, and looking down I saw—the head and face of a spy!"

"There was light enough coming through a crack or hole in the plastering, yonder, to show me *so* much; and, while I could see barely enough to know that it *was* a man, I knew that none of our brothers would be playing such a dastardly part."

"And then?"

"Without a sound—noiseless as one of my glorious pets!—I stole away, to come around here, where the Master was good enough to hear my words, and to act upon them without doubt or question."

"Because they were good—better than any words my tongue could have fashioned so readily," quickly chimed in the fire-bug chief. "It is only right that ye all should know just what ye owe to this, our most worthy brother, and so—listen!"

"He not only discovered the spy, but he formed the plan by which that dangerous devil was entrapped so easily. To this most worthy member, brethren, we owe our heartiest thanks, for without him, we would have been but as birds in the net of the fowler!"

The Snake Man bowed his head as though finding it a difficult matter to bear up under that load of unexpected honors, to which was now added the grateful murmurs of all that assembly; a sound which only common prudence kept from breaking into a roar of thanks.

When that murmur died away, the chief spoke again:

"When the proper time comes, I will have something more to say on this subject, brethren, but for the present—attention!"

Niccoli Vivaldi fell back to his regular station, and all came to order with trained promptitude. The chief rose to his feet, and pointing one gloved hand at the prisoner, slowly uttered:

"We have a totally unexpected visitor this evening, my brothers, and while we are taken somewhat by surprise, yet we can at least enjoy an introduction, in due form. So—Liberty Bund!"

As one man the members lifted right hand in salutation.

"A stranger guest has honored us with his presence this night, my brothers. Greet him in accordance with his merits, his rank, his name! I now introduce for your fraternal greeting—Prince John, detective, spy, man-hunter, blood-sucker, son of the devil!"

A muffled yet unmistakable howl of intense rancor burst from the assembly at that characteristic introduction, and twice as many eager hands were stretched out toward the bound captive, only kept from fastening upon his person in a death-clutch by the presence of their chief.

Almost as a matter of course Ivan Petroff felt in duty bound to go at least one step further than his associates, and holding up a copper cup in one hand, wildly gesticulating with the other, he cried out:

"It is *this*—fit food for the devil's cub to

chew upon, Master! Say the word—make but a sign—and, *pouf!* his vile head splits so open-wide that 'twould seem he died a-laughing!"

"What have you there, brother?"

"A dynamite cap, Little Father! *May I?* Into his mouth—slap I his jaws together *like this*," illustrating on himself with that unarmed hand. "One moment, then—ah-ha! the good work is done!"

Beyond a doubt the dynamiter was thoroughly in earnest, just then, and had the chief granted the permission he craved, just as surely the career of the Insurance Special would have terminated then and there.

But the fire-bug leader was not yet ready to execute the enemy whom he had already doomed to death, and his hand went up with a forbidding gesture.

"Not yet, brother. Wait until the prisoner can be fully heard in his own defense. After hearing is time enough for judging, and so—your attention, John Prince!"

Those dark eyes were already fixed upon that masked mystery, even then striving to divine who this leading spirit might be; but no word came in answer to that call.

"Silence can only the more surely convict you, John Prince," coldly said the presiding officer, after waiting for a few seconds. "By speaking out, by telling the naked truth, you may possibly save your life. And now that I have fairly warned you—answer!"

"Through what agency did you learn when and where the Liberty Bund was to assemble this evening, John Prince?"

Not a sound came from the prisoner. He sat as though turned to marble, only his dark eyes sparkling with life and fire as evidence to the contrary.

He knew that speaking would be but a waste of breath. He knew that judgment had already been passed upon him, and that no plea he could offer would suffice to prolong his lease of life for even one poor minute.

CHAPTER XXII.

UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH.

WAITING in grim patience for a full minute—a space of time which is wonderfully magnified under circumstances such as these—the chief of fire-bugs spoke again.

"When did you see Herman Richter last, John Prince?"

The same silence, the same motionless quiet.

"Your silence is condemning you, prisoner, even more certainly than could the most reckless speech," coldly pursued the Master. "Once more, defend yourself, if defense be possible!"

"You were caught while playing spy and eavesdropper. You have dared to enter where none save oath-bound brethren have admission, and by so intruding, you have forfeited your life, by all laws of our league."

"Yet there are various grades of guilt, with different degrees of punishment fitly adapted to each. In *your* case there may be a chance left open by utilizing which you may possibly escape death. If that way be pointed out to you, prisoner, will you accept it?"

Still utter silence on the part of the detective. Knowing that he was surely death-doomed, so far as these lawless beings could insure his punishment, Prince John held his peace, waiting for the right moment to speak out.

"From whose treacherous lips did you gather information concerning the Liberty Bund, John Prince? Name that traitor, and reap the reward."

This is only a sample of the questions which were hurled at that silent figure. All were aimed at the same end, but ingeniously varied as to wording, as though the Master still held hopes of hitting upon a combination which would surprise, coax or frighten an answer from those stubbornly locked lips.

It was plain to be seen that the chief more than suspected Herman Richter of giving the information on which the Insurance Detective had so promptly acted, but he failed to secure any confirmation of that belief from the captive.

At length, grown wearied with his vain

efforts to extort some valuable information from the detective, the chief spoke to his followers:

"You have heard, brothers. You can bear witness that I have given the accused all the chance any reasonable being could possibly ask for, to clear himself of the deadly sin, but that he has stubbornly declined to avail himself of that clemency."

"Now, his fate rests with you, brothers! You all know where he was taken, and under just what circumstances, so—your verdict?"

"Death!"

As one man they spoke, as one voice the sentence came.

"By what method shall the dark river be crossed, brothers?"

This time there was little unanimity in the answer, for each member had his own idea as to the proper method of execution, and lost no time in making that opinion heard by all the others.

Some advocated shooting, others the knife, while a fair proportion held out for poison, with permission to draw near enough to critically note each change, each spasm of agony which should precede the coming of death!

And Ivan Petroff, as a matter of course, could see no method of punishment at all equal to that administered through the agency of his pet explosive, dear, darling dynamite!

"As for the noise—bah! Give *me* permission to play executioner, my Master, and ye shall see! A smothered puff—*gone!*"

The masked officer listened to one and all, yet, judging from the cat-like intentness with which his gaze was fixed upon the helpless detective, it is more than likely that patience would have been greatly abridged had the prisoner himself been out of ear-shot.

But his time was spent in vain, if he really expected to break down that magnificent nerve by such means. Prince John made no move, no sign, but in his eyes there glowed a fire of proud contempt and defiance.

Presently the Master lifted a hand, and instant silence fell upon that noisy gathering. Then the chief spoke to Prince John:

"You have heard the verdict, prisoner. You have refused to plead when a fair chance was offered you, and if death has come as reward for your contumacy in part, you have none other than yourself to thank."

"Still, there are deaths, and other deaths! Some are swift and comparatively painless, while others can be prolonged through a seeming eternity, where each second is an age of agony!"

A pause, silence on the prisoner's part, then words:

"Have you any particular preference as to the method of hopping the twig, my dear sir? If so, will you kindly express it?"

"So that you may elect another method?" sneeringly asked the Insurance Detective.

"Then you *can* speak, after all?" in mock amazement.

"Plain enough to let you know this much," added the prisoner, forming each word slowly, to make them clearly intelligible through that muffling bandage which reduced his vocal organs to little louder than a husky whisper. "Make sure work of it, you dog of the devil, or I'll hunt you down, one after the other, to gallows or to cell!"

A fierce if smothered snarl came from the fire-bugs as they heard that cool threat, but a gesture from the chief silenced even the most venomous among them all.

"You will accept no favors, then, John Prince? Good! That is more than might have been expected from a cur, and hence is so much the welcomer to our ears! Now—listen, I beg of you, dear friend!"

"If necessary, I could read your record from the day of your entering the ranks of hired bloodsuckers, John Prince! I could tell you of the crooked, devious, devil's ways you have crept and crawled through, for the pleasure of entrapping a luckless brother, or of winning a few dollars of blood-money—thou most abased of all modern Judases!"

"A Daniel come to judgment!" muttered the detective, scorn glowing in his dark eyes.

"And Judas is to be judged!" swiftly retorted the chief. "But that part comes

later on. Just now—let me tell you, bloodhound!

"Not content with the shameful record you had built up along the Eastern slope, you went to Chicago. There you added to your record, after much the same fashion. But even *that* was not enough to satisfy your infamous ambition, and so you came still further West in hopes of adding to your reputation."

"You vowed to solve the secrets of the fire-bugs, only a portion of which you had conquered, in Brooklyn, in Jersey City, in Chicago. You said you could and would complete the full record here in Frisco, and—I seriously doubted it, *then*, but now—well, I'm leaning just as far in the other direction, John Prince!"

A low, meaning chuckle followed these words, and the sound was caught up by the fire-bugs as though they one and all recognized the exquisite jest which lay hidden back of that cunning speech.

It is barely possible that they did so comprehend, since the detective himself caught what might prove to be an inkling of the truth.

The bare idea was horrible enough, yet he never flinched a hair's breadth, nor could those keenly-watching eyes detect the slightest possible change in that visible upper-half face.

"Have you no curiosity alive, John Prince?" asked the chief, after a brief pause. "Do you not wish me to tell you my full meaning?"

"What's the use of bothering, when you are just aching to tell?" coolly retorted the detective.

"And not only tell, but perform!" cried the Master, with undisguised viciousness, as though stung to the quick by that contemptuous tone. "Be it so, then, John Prince," moderating his tones and assuming a cold composure which was only outside

"The breath it took to utter that boast was hardly past your lips before I knew of your saying, John Prince! I knew that you were on your way here, before the conductor called for a sight of your pass. And knowing all this, why did I not arrange a more fitting reception in honor of your arrival, do you ask?"

"Well, for various reasons. One of them will do for now: because I set you down as an arrant braggart and liar, whom it would be only too easy to meet and defeat on your own choice of ground!"

And you really think you've done it, now, don't you?"

"If not quite yet, that fault will soon be remedied, never you borrow fear, John Prince! To prove it—listen, once more, I beg of you!"

"As I said, you took a solemn oath to solve the secrets of the infernal fire-bugs, and you certainly have lost little time in trying to keep that portion of your vow. Now—what an enormous pity 'twould be if you should die perjured!"

Turning his gaze from prisoner to members, the Master continued, his meaning but thinly veiled:

"Brothers, the next leaf will be turned to-morrow night, as already agreed upon in secret session. Until then this, our dearly-beloved friend and highly-esteemed visitor, must be guarded as the very apple of our eye! How can that best be done, brothers?"

Niccoli Vivaldi sprang to his feet with lifted hand, and caught the notice of the chief first of all.

"I recognize you, brother." Speak on."

"What safer guardians could such a precious package have than my glorious pets, Master? Only for them we would not have been honored by this public call! And so—let my snakes hold honorable watch and ward over the esteemed visitor, my Master!"

Now Prince John understood what that peculiar odor had been at which he had wondered while waiting and watching for the coming of the chief fire-bug; he had been crouching in espiail directly beneath a den of snakes!

The Human Serpent was clearly in earnest when making this suggestion, but instead of accepting the proposal, the Master slowly shook his head in rejection, then saying:

"You forget, brother, that only through the lips of a traitor could this bloodhound of

a soulless combination have won the position from whence your gallant hands dragged him, a prisoner. And if to one, why not to another?"

"If that traitor was Herman Richter, as I now firmly believe, would he not tell others what he has told this bloodsucker? If John Prince fails to return to report success, will not the German cur take alarm, and in hopes of currying fresh favor with the police, tell them of this and our other places of meeting?"

"Give me leave, Master, and Herman Richter will speak no more words to living body!" eagerly cried out the Russian dynamiter.

"Peace, brother! One thing at a time, please. And so—your offer must be rejected, brother," with a bow which indicated the Italian. "The prisoner must be removed to a place of greater safety while the darkness lasts, and every trace of his being here, with all signs which can possibly injure us in even the eyes of the accursed police, must be obliterated, forthwith!"

As these final word passed his lips, the chief of the fire-bugs flung up a hand by way of a signal, and instantly those nearest the chair in which the Insurance Special was seated, pounced upon him, as though eager to do him to death.

"Harm him not, as yet, my brothers!" called forth their Master, sharply, at this. "He is sentenced to death, 'tis true, but the exact method of that death lies with me, your chief! He shall keep his oath, even in death—ha! ha! ha!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

NICCOLI, THE SNAKE-MAN.

As yet nothing had been done toward clearing up the mystery which hung over the killing of Gerald Quayle, although that mystery, to the many, was nothing at all.

On the published facts, and every paper issued in San Francisco had an abundant supply of those for its patrons, there could be but the one opinion: the criminal had already been found and imprisoned, in the person of Herman Richter, head-bookkeeper for the firm of Quayle & Co.

To those few who had been admitted to the prisoner, he had protested his complete innocence, but that might be taken as a foregone conclusion.

And, with the single exception of Prince John, the Special, not one of those few visitors but what went away fully convinced that the German was guilty of the killing, although it might possibly come under a modified degree.

The long visit paid Richter by the Insurance Detective had brightened him up wonderfully, and it was with steadily growing impatience that the prisoner waited for word or sight of his newly-formed friend and ally.

Neither word nor message came to the jail that night, nor was there either forthcoming when the new day dawned.

With rapidly-growing anxiety Herman Richter took note of the waning forenoon, those parting words of the detective ringing through his ears. If word should not come to his cell before nine o'clock!

That hour came, and was announced by the deep-toned timepiece, each slow, measured stroke sounding to those strained ears like the death-knell of his last frail hope!

Nine o'clock, and no Prince John!

Another hour—each minute of which seemed tenfold as long as it ought to be—and still no call, no message, or explanation why the Insurance Detective had failed to keep the appointment he had so positively made with the imprisoned bookkeeper.

Not until then did Herman Richter fully yield the hope he had been clinging to, and gaining ear of the assistant jailer, he implored him to send a message without delay to the head of the Police Department.

A much duller man than the jailer would have seen that his charge was in terrible earnest, and doubtless fancying that the supposed assassin was longing to rid himself of that awful burden so far as open confession of guilt could lend relief, he hurried off word to Chief Paulette in such shape as brought the official to the jail in hot haste.

Only the promptness with which that message was answered in person betokened the ardent expectations of the chief, however. Outwardly he was as cool, as composed, as gravely dignified as ever.

In almost perfect silence Chief Paulette listened to what the prisoner had to say, only now and then asking a question which cleared up a minor point which, left thus, might have caused a waste of precious time through turning back, later on.

Herman Richter, now fully convinced that the detective through whose agency he had be-

gun to hope for a full clearance of name and fame, had fallen a sacrifice to his professional ardor, made no effort to mask his knowledge concerning the Liberty Bund.

"It is of *them* you must demand my friend, sir!" he added, after detailing what had passed between Prince John and himself on that second visit. "He was going to spy upon that called session, and if caught—*ach!* Is it so, then? Does my last friend, my final hope, go vanishing—*thus?*"

While the strongly agitated German was uttering these broken sentences, Chief Paulette was drawing a number of papers from an inner pocket, one of which he selected, giving it a brief glance before passing it over to the prisoner.

"Read that, please, Mr. Richter," was his only comment, at first.

A glance was sufficient to take in the brief contents; merely four lines above the signature, to state that the writer had gone in haste to Sacramento, following up a burning clue; but that he would probably return in a couple of days, at the outside.

And under those four lines was the written name of John Prince!

Twice over did Herman Richter read the brief note, but then he tossed the paper back with a low, husky, yet fierce cry.

"A lie! A forgery, false as hell! If you believe *that*, sir, you will never see John Prince again—never solve the mystery of his death!"

So terribly earnest was the man, and so probable was his account, that Chief Paulette himself began to doubt the authenticity of the communication; and having already learned from Richter where that extra session of the Liberty Bund was to have been held, he hurried away from the jail to begin his investigations.

Virgo Paulette had hardly left the jail before the head of the Fire Department called to see the prisoner, and knowing from what had already transpired that Orson McAleney was a warm friend to the Insurance Special, Herman Richter lost little time in repeating his tale of sore anxiety.

"That is a devil's lie about his going away from Frisco! Would he leave, so, without coming or sending word to me? Would he—no, never! It is a death-trap for Prince! He has fallen into the clutches of those demons—he will be murdered—he is dead, now!"

McAleney was powerfully impressed, but Richter was too intensely agitated now to answer in order the questions the fire-chief pelted him with.

"My friend—I had but him left! On *him* my life, my honor, my true love hung! And now—*ach!* He is gone—he is snared, just as I have been death-doomed by those fiends from hell!"

Still, McAleney managed to gather that the Police Department had taken the matter in charge, and despairing of learning more in time to be of service to the missing detective, he hurried away from the jail, hoping to be in time to join the force which Paulette would certainly send to raid that rendezvous denounced by Herman Richter.

He was barely in time, for Virgo Paulette in person was moving away from the Central at the head of a small but picked force, all armed and prepared for hot and deadly work in case of need.

Without asking permission, Chief McAleney joined the little squad, and with but few words passing between them, they were shortly in front of the building under whose roof Herman Richter declared that called meeting of the Liberty Bund was to take place.

The building was of goodly size, the lower floor containing a saloon, a fruit store, and an ill-smelling junk shop, all of which places were run by natives of Italy.

The two first named places were carried on in the name of Niccoli Vivaldi, for a number of years a fairly noted character in San Francisco, thanks to his attachment for and public exhibitions of snakes and serpents of all kinds and sizes, venomous and harmless alike.

And it was Niccoli Vivaldi, better known, perhaps, as the "Man Snake," or the "Snake-man," by whom the chief of police was met when the little squad entered the saloon, with Virgo Paulette at their head.

Smiling, bowing, grinning, showing his yellow teeth in forced delight, the Italian greeted his visitors, head and eyes and face more than ever resembling the snakes he nourished.

With such creatures as this, Chief Paulette had little politeness to expend, and as one of his men closed the front door, he coldly asked:

"What time did the meeting break up, last night, Vivaldi?"

"What meeting, sir?" innocently asked the Italian.

"That of the Liberty Bund, I called! It met here, last night, in extraordinary session, under a call from the one you term The Master. Now, I repeat: at what hour did the meeting break up?"

"Since the master knows so much, surely he knows *when*," smoothly uttered the Snake-man, his forehead seeming to flatten still more, his small, deep-set eyes to glitter and sparkle afresh.

"I know too much to make it safe for you to

even think of lying, Niccoli," coldly said the chief. "Will you answer?"

"If I say that there was no meeting, master?"

"But I know there was one."

Vivakli flung out his hands and shrugged his shoulders. Plainer than tongue could shape it, this meant: what use? If truth was branded a lie, in advance, surely silence was wisest for poor Niccoli!

Chief Paulette read that gestural combination correctly, and made a brief sign, which sent a couple of his men at the Italian.

The Snake-charmer made no struggle, meekly submitting to the search which brought to light nothing more harmful than the cross-hilted knife which his breed invariably wear somewhere about their person.

Then, with strong hands caring for the Snake-man, and a single officer left below to guard against intrusion or flight by that main avenue, the search of that ancient landmark (so entitled to be called, according to the annals of the Phoenix City) was fairly begun.

Meekly protesting that he was only overjoyed at having the honor to show such illustrious visitors over his humble premises, the Snake-man strove to win his freedom, at least of limb; but the chief of police was taking no long chances, and acting on the information given him by Herman Richter, he hardly required a more active guide.

Yet there was precious little discovered to reward his exploration, barring a collection of vile-scented reptiles which had, after a certain fashion, won for this snake-skulled Italian a wide notoriety.

The long apartment where Herman Richter assured the chief the band of agitators were wont to hold their sessions, was found; but now all signs of such occupancy had vanished, and the larger portion of the room was filled with old junk, rags, second-hand furniture, and the like.

At the rear of the long apartment was a space otherwise clear, where now stood wire-fronted boxes and cages containing the snakes of which Niccoli Vivakli was so inordinately proud, so passionately fond; and as the search-party gazed upon these, the Italian gave a shrill, sibilant sound through his yellow teeth, which instantly roused the reptiles to seeming fury, causing them to hiss, to blow, to rattle, to strike; while that peculiar, sickening odor seemed doubled tenfold in strength.

The search was extended further, lights being called into play when that small, dark, closet-like room was discovered, as well as the low, upper story, now almost empty, but where the disgusting odor of the serpent den was still perceptible.

But search as they might, nothing was found to confirm the story told by Herman Richter, save the general arrangement of the place; and not a sign was picked up which could possibly explain the absence of Prince John, the Insurance Detective.

The Snake-man was closely questioned, but with no better success. He knew nothing, hence could tell naught. When threatened with arrest, he shrugged his shoulders and thrust out his snaky muzzle; what was to be, must be!

And then, leaving a couple of officers in private dress to watch over the premises on the outside, front and rear, the police squad passed on, to pursue the same methods at each of the other houses named by Herman Richter as being regular meeting-places of the so-called Liberty Bund.

And then, when he was fully satisfied that he might do so without running too great a risk of discovery, Niccoli, the Snake-man, went up to that reptilian den, and amid hissing and rattlings and blowings, he whispered his secret in snakish gloe.

And the search-squad, under Chief Paulette, vainly hunted for some clue to the missing detective!

CHAPTER XXIV.

PRINCE JOHN IN THE FIRE-TRAP.

It was the night following that called session of the Liberty Bund, and the detective for whom the police force of San Francisco had put in so many hours of faithful search, was still alive, although few living mortals ever found themselves more helpless than John Prince was, just at the time.

For one thing, he was wrapped about with hempen cords until he was unable to move a limb, further than sending a shiver along it through muscular vibration.

His arms were tied behind his back, at elbows and at wrists. His legs were tied at knees and at ankles. Then, in addition, half a dozen bands of the small but strong hempen rope passed around his body and arms together.

As though this was deemed insufficient, the detective was placed inside of a crockery crate, and all around his person, as he stood upon his feet, was packed straw, rags, oily waste such as is used in packing engine bearings, and filling car journal-boxes.

This inflammable stuff served to hold him in a fairly upright position, even should he permit his strained muscles to relax with his own

weight; but that significant support was hardly provided through tender mercy for a pitted prisoner!

This packing rose well about the detective's waist, and still higher up was yet another precaution: a snug gag was fastened between his jaws, rendering speech or an alarm utterly beyond his powers.

Prince John's eyes were left uncovered, but that could hardly be deemed a favor, or a token of mercy, all things borne in mind.

That crate was situated near the center of a long and wide apartment which seemed the store-room for an extensive wholesale establishment, judging from the long tables over which were spread muslin covers, as though to protect valuable goods from the dust.

And yet, though there is very little light, just then, those covers seem to lie very low and remarkably flat, for moush of a stock!

Moving softly, like one who wears rubbers or felt foot-covering of some description, was a masked shape of average size; and when he paused in front of the helpless detective to speak, the first note proclaimed him as the same individual who had presided over the Liberty Bund when Prince John was so adroitly entrapped by the Snake-man.

"Are you growing weary, my dear fellow?" asked that oddly nasal voice, as its owner paused with gloved hands resting on the rough, twisted top of that crate in front of the Special. "Are you anxious to have the finale set in fair motion?"

Of course there could come no answer from those gagged jaws, but eyes met eyes, and there were no signs of fear or of pleading in the dark orbes of the death-doomed detective.

Although he knew that he hardly stood one chance in a thousand of winning clear with life, Prince John was far too proud to betray his natural fears and regrets to this merciless adversary.

"You are true grit, Prince John," coolly admitted the chief of the fire-bugs. "I can afford to speak the simple truth, so far, since you can never bring up my words as a recommendation—in this world at least!"

He ceased speaking, to laugh softly, gently, like one thoroughly well pleased with not only himself, but with all his affairs as well.

"Have patience, my friend! The end is now very nigh at hand, and I merely wish time enough in which to explain why it is you need no longer hope for assistance from the outside.

"Of course your capture came just a trifle prematurely, for our arrangements, but we are genuine hustlers, and the day had not fairly dawned before we were smoothing over all difficulties.

"For instance: we sent Chief Paulette a note, stating that an important clue had unexpectedly called you away to Sacramento, but that you counted on returning in a day or two.

"That proved insufficient, thanks to Herman Richter, whom our spies reported as having called both Paulette and McAloney to the jail, no doubt for the purpose of telling them what he had told you.

"If we doubted who set you on our track, today has banished the last lingering doubt; for, closely following that visit to the cell of Herman Richter, Chief Paulette led a squad of police to search the house where you played your last game of eavesdropping and espial!

"Of course that visit was discounted, hours before, and everything was prepared for his innocent reception. He came, he saw, he did not conquer worth a cent! Neither there nor at either of the other houses where the Liberty Bund occasionally holds forth.

"Still, that trouble visit, and those abominably rude questions, told a sufficiently plain tale, and so I sent a cipher dispatch to a trusty friend at Sacramento City, and the result came in a dispatch to the chief of police, signed with your name!"

Again the arch-villain paused to laugh, gently yet thoroughly. He seemed to fairly revel in his satanic ingenuity.

"All this by way of explaining why your ardently longed-for allies have not, will not come, Prince John! And now, having told you what can never come to pass, at least early enough in the night to be of assistance to you, let me dimly paint a picture of what is to be!

"I gave you a faint hint, last night, shortly after your capture, but I could not do the subject full justice, then, taken so by surprise. Now—well, that's different!

"Having thrown the police completely off the right scent, and so insured a fair field for operations, what comes next on the list, is how your final reward is to be measured out.

"Surely you have seen enough to at least give a guess as to the ending? You, who made your brags that you would meet and foil those infernal fire-bugs on their own ground, at their own best hold?"

The chief paused again, although he knew his victim was powerless to answer by word of mouth. Still, if he could only bring a quiver to those eyes, a line of fear to that handsome face!

But neither one nor the other came to reward his diabolical wish, or to encourage him in

pursuing that course of mental torture. Still, he doggedly stuck to the line he had marked out for himself, knowing that he had an abundance of time left.

"Surely you ought to be able to make a very fair guess, John Prince, since you have made such a close and careful study of the fire-bug methods, for a number of years past?"

Moving to one side and shifting the small lantern which had until then rested upon an end of a table close by, the chief waved a hand toward a barrel which stood on end, only a few feet away from where the death-doomed detective was stationed.

"You can see for yourself, in part, my very dear friend," he added, his tones sounding more distinctly nasal than usual, if possible. "That barrel forms part of your funeral pyre, John Prince!"

Again that low, sneering, diabolical chuckle.

Taking the lantern with him, the more clearly to reveal what was assuredly a death-trap, the chief cast those yellow rays fairly upon a common wooden chopping-bowl which now rested upon the barrel-head.

Slightly tipping the bowl toward the helpless detective, he showed by the lantern-rays that the vessel was nearly full of splintered pine, cut from a particularly resinous bit of wood, liable to flash up at the touch of a match.

And yet, as though this was deemed insufficient, he tipped the bowl a trifle further, so that a few drops of liquid trickled over its edge.

Touching a finger-tip to this the fire-bug strode back, to rub the dampened leather against the detective's nose, giving him the scent of kerosene and turpentine, combined.

"Nothing like making everything clear as one proceeds, is a favorite maxim of mine, dear friend," maliciously said the villain, drawing back again. "If seeing is believing, smelling ought to make assurance doubly sure!

"You recall that imperfect machine, at the Quayle building? That proved a failure because of a defect in the slow-match, which no visual inspection could detect; but this—your eyes, my coming saint!"

From a pocket the fire-bug drew a candle which had been lit before, but which was sufficiently long for his purpose.

Moving to the up-ended barrel, holding the lantern so that the detective might follow his motions with exactness, and at the same time see what he himself was doing, the knave pushed the butt-end of that candle into the midst of those prepared splinters, leaving the blackened wick less than an inch above the inflammable surface.

When satisfied that he had estimated the depth precisely enough, the fire-bug struck a match and held it to the wick until the candle was fairly ignited.

Chuckling with subdued but devilish gloe, the fire-bug brought his lantern back to its former position, then leaned upon the crate while speaking to his intended victim.

"There's more than one method of skinning a cat, my very dear and highly esteemed brother! You swore an oath to never give over the hunt until you had solved each and every one of the methods made use of by those you branded as fire-bugs.

"You came all the way to San Francisco with that end in view. Well, the end is very nigh, so far as you are concerned, but you shall not die entirely a perjured detective, John Prince!

"I speak from the card, dear boy. I am one of those 'infernal fire-bugs.' And since your very minutes of life are fairly numbered, John Prince, I can very well afford to speak the naked truth to you.

"So I tell you this: you saw one of our methods of winning insurance money, in the chamber of that forsworn Herman Richter. And here, by simply looking and listening, you can see and understand the second and last of our daisy little money-making machines!

"That wooden bowl is thoroughly saturated with kerosene and turpentine. It is nearly full of pitch-pine splinters and sawdust, rendered still more inflammable by the mixture which you can still scent upon your nose-tip, John!"

"Then, to make it all more blinding, that barrel is full of turpentine!"

"The candle will burn long enough for me to get to a place of safety, and establish a thorough-going alibi; while you—listen, John Prince! You will see and experience just this!

"The candle will burn down until its flame touches the tip of one of those fat splinters; the merest contact will be sufficient! 'Twill flame up almost like gunpowder, and when the entire bowl ignites—try to imagine what a glorious blaze, what an intense heat that will make!

"As you can see for yourself, dear friend, yonder barrel has deep chines, and by the time the bowl has burned through at the bottom, what is left of the fuel will all be caught and held inside of the chine.

"Then it will burn, with only one witness—but what an intensely interested spectator that individual will be! With what breathless cal-

culatation will be mark the progress of this, my patent death-trap!

"When the flames eat a way through that barrel-head, dear friend, one or two things must certainly happen: the barrel will blaze up like a torch, sending a roaring cascade of living fire out of the barrel, or else the barrel will burst, with an explosion strong enough to cast the rain of flames over this entire room—and John Prince!

"In short, my noble man-hunter, there may be an explosion, there surely will be a—cre—mation!"

CHAPTER XXV.

AN HOUR OF MENTAL AGONY.

JUST as a hungry gourmand might try to prolong the taste of an unusually delicious morsel, so this arch-villain mouthed those words, breaking into another of his low, inhuman laughs as he watched the doomed detective, even then wishing for more; the rarest spice of all was lacking so long as no trace of fear or of pleading could be seen in that countenance.

So far he was balked. No matter what Prince John might be feeling inwardly, on the surface naught was permitted to show itself; his face, though looking pale by the dim light of the lantern, was but a comely blank.

That laugh ceased, those eyes seemed to catch a red reflection from the light as their owner leaned over the edge of the crockery-crate, to stare for a brief space intently into the face of his victim.

"John Prince, you are suffering the torments of the damned, although you are stoic enough to make your face tell lies! You are dreading the doom that you now see is inevitable! You are cursing the brain that had wit, the hand that had nerve enough to plan and carry into execution this glorious revenge!

"You are cursing me now! But—it is like cursing an impersonality! If you could only know *who* to accuse, *who* to execrate with the poor brief remnant of life!

"Would not *that* be some slight satisfaction, John Prince? Would you not like to know just what and who I am? If I thought—and yet—why not?"

In lower, muttering tones came these last words, and drawing back a bit, to cast a slow, circling glance around that dimly-lighted space, one gloved hand went up to the black hood, as though the chief of fire-bugs was on the point of thus far unmasking himself.

The temptation seemed perfectly natural. No man could act as he had and now was acting, without feeling an intense hatred for the Insurance Special; and, surely, 'twould be the cream of his vengeance to let the baffled detective know what and who he was, too late for aught save a few death-curses?

Turning swiftly back, the lantern-light falling clearly upon the face of the bound detective, the chief of the Frisco fire-bugs broke into a low, mocking, diabolical laugh.

"At last, Prince John! Man instead of marble! You can feel emotion, and I've beaten you at all points!"

It was a cunning trick, and so neatly played that even the steel-nerved detective was not proof against it. In his face, so sternly schooled until now, showed a fierce, eager longing for the first glimpse of the face of this demon in human guise. Until now he had been foiled, by figure, motion, voice; but with that mask removed—

Instead, that sneering laughter!

Like one who feels he has at last skimmed the cream from his dish of vengeance, the chief turned abruptly away from the crate, busying his hands for a few seconds with a sheet of white printing paper, out of which he deftly fashioned a sort of truncated cone, or bodiless skirt, open at both top and bottom, the lower circumference just small enough to handily cover that fire-bowl, yet rest on top of the turpentine barrel, inside the chine.

Placing this over his fire-trap, the chief turned back to his victim, coolly and methodically examining his bonds by sense of sight and touch, pausing only when fully convinced that they were still in perfect order, and that escape for the Insurance Detective without other aid than his own was impossible.

"Even the dearest of friends must part, Prince John," the fire-bug said, coming around to the front of his helpless enemy. "Even more important business calls me away from your side, dear boy, also—And yet, is it so certain that you would fare any the better for having a companion through the next hour?"

"They say silent meditation is good for the human soul. And if anybody needed something of the sort, I reckon that body belongs to John Prince, bloodsucker and man-hunter!"

"Ponder, reflect, repent, and—if your fancy turns in that superstitious direction, dear son—pray! Prayer may produce a miracle; who knows? And nothing less than a miracle can save you from death inside of this very hour, Prince John!"

"Look!" with a gesture toward that masked fire-bowl, the candle showing but a dim light through the opaque sheet. "I really flatter myself on that final touch!"

"You can see that the death-watch is ticking—ticking—ticking off the seconds which separate you from death by fire! You know that there can be but the one ending; you know that the instant yonder dim torch burns low enough to touch even a point of a single splinter of that fat pine, the rest will come, swift, pitiless, inexorable as the stroke of fate itself!

"If you could watch the gradual wasting away of that candle, you might brace your nerves to some extent, but now—ah-ha! If I might only *see* as well as *know*!"

He seemed more demon than man, just then, and Prince John would gladly have forfeited his remaining lease of life for the fierce pleasure of having free hands and a death-grip upon that throat.

Still, his pale face betrayed no emotion, and without that last crowning triumph, the fire-bug turned and taking lantern with him, glided silently away, leaving the doomed detective to face death alone.

Not until he was fully convinced that the incendiary had actually left that floor, if not the house as well, did Prince John permit himself to stir muscle or betray any signs of the mental torture which he was naturally suffering.

Then he flung all of his muscular powers into a prolonged effort to burst, stretch or slip his bonds, if only far enough to enable him to work a single hand free. If that much could be won, the rest would be easy enough!

Hampered as he was, the Insurance Special made a wonderful fight of it, for life hung in the balance. Bound thus, he could do nothing more than watch and wait for the coming of death in one of its most horrible shapes; free—ah! how inexpressibly sweet was freedom!

He strove to free himself as only one of his caliber can strive, but in spite of his fiercest, most prolonged efforts, those cruel bonds would neither burst, slip, nor stretch.

Breathless, his head swimming, a reddish blur before his eyes, the death-doomed detective ceased his vain struggles, staring dizzily at the masked fire-bowl, the candle sending a dim, ghostly light through that sheet of blank paper.

How long had the candle been burning? How far had the heat melted the stearine? How long would it be before that tiny flame would come in contact with these fat-pine splinters?

If he could only *see*! If he could only *know*—but wasn't that precisely what the fire-bug said?

Rallying his strength once more, Prince John strove to throw himself out of that mass of inflammables. If he could only contrive to upset the crate into which he had been placed!

In vain, now! The crate rested on too broad a base for upsetting through any efforts he could make in that cruelly hampered condition, and it was equally impossible for the detective to writhe or cast himself outside.

And yet—if either only might be! Once outside, in spite of his bonds he surely could contrive to reach that barrel by rolling over and over? And, once there, might he not do more? Might he not blow out that candle, or knock the fire-bowl off the turpentine-barrel?

Either way would surely avert the horrible catastrophe, but—he could attain neither!

Only when he knew beyond the shadow of a hope that he could accomplish nothing to help himself, did Prince John relax his desperate efforts. And then he again strove to free his jaws from that gag.

If he could do *that* much, even! His cries for help would surely reach to the street, and night though it was, he knew that would mean at least a chance for his rescue before the fire-bowl did its awful work.

In vain. The fire-bugs had neglected nothing. Unless outside aid should come to him, Prince John could do nothing save wait and watch—ah, in watching lay his acutest torture, just as his arch-enemy had foreseen when masking that fire-bowl!

Was the end yet distant? Was it near—here—only a single breath away? How many more times might he breathe, thus, before that dimly illumined mask should turn to a sheet of fire?

And then—when the now tiny torch had touched one or more of those fat-pine splinters, how much longer would be his life-lease? And how would that life be terminated?

Would it be prolonged, as that devil in human shape had suggested? Would the fire-bowl burn and blaze and roar until the heated mass ate its way through that thick oaken barrel-head?

And then, when the turpentine should ignite? Would it burn as a holiday bonfire blazes, or would the fiery flood bubble up and overflow the barrel, thus coming in contact with the foul matter into the midst of which he had been packed by his enemies?

Or, again, would that barrel become heated enough to convert a portion of its contents into gas? Would the barrel burst, and in bursting, mercifully carry death to him on one or more of its heavy staves?

After this fashion ran the thoughts of the helpless detective, when he knew that nothing more was left him to do; only to wait, and watch and wonder—for hope was left entirely out of the question, now!

The wonder is that such a horrible ordeal did not turn the brain of the one subjected to its torture.

To know that death was surely drawing nearer! That each passing instant carried him one heart-throb nearer to the awful end! To know all this, yet kept in hideous ignorance of just how nigh that catastrophe had come!

That was the worst of all! If he might have been left free to take note; if he could watch the gradual wasting away of that candle, and so know when he must brace his nerves to meet death as a brave man wishes to encounter his inevitable doom!

That would have been easy, by comparison, while *this*—ah, it was torture past all powers of description!

Then—so suddenly that Prince John gave a start and choked himself with a cry which that gag refused passage—the light flamed up, and the white mask catching fire, melted away, to show his starting eyes that bowl of splinters and sawdust already covered with hot blaze!

Although the death-doomed detective had tried to discount all this time and time again during those long minutes of horrible torture, the reality took him by surprise, so instantaneous was the workings of that diabolically ingenious fire-trap.

Barely the space of a single breath from that first quick flash, yet that wooden bowl was now a mass of fire, the flames shooting high, the black smoke rising in waving columns, the mass crackling, then roaring as the flames ate deeper into the mixture.

Some of the stuff bubbled up and crept over the edges of the bowl, carrying the fire down to that barrel-head so soon. And it—stout stuff though those oaken staves were, they must be pretty thoroughly saturated with turpentine by this! And—how much longer?

When would the catastrophe come?

CHAPTER XXVI.

A LIFE FOR A LIFE.

JUST as Prince John asked himself this question, almost hoping that the end might come at once, since escape seemed an impossibility, the unexpected happened!

From back of one of those sheeted tables moved a human shape, that yellow glare now falling fairly upon a white, strained visage, the owner of which passed swiftly over to where that crate stood with its human contents.

"Sh-h! Not a whisper—for your life!"

In a strained, husky whisper came these words, hardly audible above the roaring of that fire-bowl and its contents, but Prince John caught them, and turned his head with a jerk as far as possible in that direction. He could catch but a passing glimpse of that figure, and as he had so completely abandoned all hope of escape, he naturally believed it was his arch-enemy, returned for a final gloating glance at his victim.

But then—

"Quiet! For your life—*my* life—*silence*!"

Again that strained voice, then an almost icy-cold hand touched his wrists as a portion of that greasy, inflammable packing was torn away.

Surely this was not—*could* that nasal tone be so completely altered as—and if his enemy, why that sudden slackening of his bonds?

Prince John gave so sudden and so violent a start that he felt the keen prick of steel, and then that voice grew clearer and more distinct as its owner said:

"Careful—oh, sir, help, instead of hindering!"

The voice of a woman, almost beyond a doubt! One hand plied a keen knife, the other plucked away those severed bonds and tore away the packing until the lower wraps could be reached.

And while hastily working thus, the stranger swiftly whispered to the man being rescued from impending death:

"For your life, sir, not a sound, not a struggle! They are watching—they will come, at the first hint of—*come to kill*!"

The last words were almost smothered by the greasy rags as the rescuer leaned far over the edge of the crockery-crate to reach the bonds which held Prince John's lower limbs helpless.

His arms were still fastened, but the instant he felt those other ropes yield to that keen blade, the detective made a vigorous effort to escape from that crate, and was only foiled by the swift clasp of strong nervous arms from behind.

"Caution, sir! If you care naught for *your* own life, take a thought for *mine*! They watch—they will kill if—oh, sir!"

Prince John turned far enough around in those rags to see that a woman had come to his rescue, and then—surely he had met her before!

The woman shrunk away, yet one trembling hand still held his arm, and she contrived to add:

"There is no chance, now, to put out the fire, sir, without alarming those who wait and watch! And that—let me save you, sir, if only because of—*my* baby boy!"

Prince John knew it all, now! This was Rika Dussing, mother of the child he had rescued from the flames at the risk of his life!

Then it was a genuine rescue, not another

phase of that truly diabolical torture invented by the chief of the Frisco fire-bugs!

No woman could play a part such as that would mean, and least of all a mother who owed him the life of her only child. And so, without further doubt or hesitation, Prince John yielded himself to that eager yet trembling grasp, and struggled out of the crockery-crate on the side furthest from that now roaring fire-trap.

With arms bound at wrists and elbows he could do nothing whatever toward extinguishing the fire, and with the gag still in place, he was debarred from calling out an alarm which might bring help in time to prevent a disastrous conflagration, or—

"Come—for dear life, come!" huskily whispered the woman, urging him further away from that dangerous vicinity. "Too late, even if we dared!" as though reading his mind as Prince John looked toward that fire. "And if we dared—oh, sir, trust in me for a while, and—come!"

Still crippled by bonds and gag, what else could the detective do?

He yielded, but so reluctantly that his rescuer spoke again, her tones sounding harder, sterner than before:

"Obey, sir, or my death be upon your head! I will save your life—I am risking my own existence in order to pay back the debt I owe you—but unless you do as I say, neither one of us will ever leave this house alive!"

There was naught of acting, here. Even if she exaggerated, it was not wittingly, for the woman clearly believed every word that now passed her lips in such haste.

Convinced of so much, Prince John yielded to her hand, and they moved further away from that blaze, nearer to the rear of that long room.

"Here—in the shadow, sir!" next whispered the woman, tugging at the detective's arm with feverish strength as she herself bent down behind the rear-most one of those long tables! "We must wait a bit longer—for love of mercy, sir, obey!"

Prince John had turned for another look at that fire-trap. It was one mass of ruddy flame and resinous smoke, while the air was growing thickly tainted with that strong scent of burning pitch.

The wooden bowl was beginning to crack open with that intense heat, and even the head of that barrel seemed all aflame!

Surely the explosion could not be delayed much longer? And yet—why were they lingering there, in such deadly peril, since he was denied permission to at least attempt to foil the Frisco fire-bugs?

Possibly it was no very difficult matter to read his thoughts in that expressive, fire-brightened countenance; but be that as it may, Mrs. Dussing touched upon that very point when her whispering voice made itself heard by the detective once more.

"Must I say it still plainer, sir? Will you not understand what it all means, when I say that—they are watching still?"

Prince John yielded to her hand, and crouched down behind that long table, yet in a position from whence he could look out of that fire-trap, as well as take note of his companion's face.

That looked almost ghastly pale, now, yet he knew it was the face of a woman who had once been gifted with far more than ordinary charms, of person if not of intellect.

He saw, too, that Rika Dussing was terribly frightened of something, and she had spoken enough to let him give a guess as to what that peril might be.

If she would only say more! If he could only question her!

At that last thought, Prince John moved his head far enough to bring the bandage that covered that gag against one corner of the table, making a desperate effort to tear the cloth away, far enough so that he might eject that gag.

No doubt he would have quickly succeeded in this effort, only for the swift interference of Rika Dussing. With a low, half-fierce cry the woman caught his shoulders, jerking him back before he could resist, at the same time speaking hurriedly, imploringly:

"Stop! Don't! If you love life—if you would not give my life over as a sacrifice, sir, pray don't try to cry out!"

Prince John shook his head, but evidently the agitated woman failed to rightly interpret that gesture, since she spoke again:

"They are—they would! They are keeping watch for the fire to spread, and until then—one cry, or the putting out of that fire-trap, would fetch them here in a swarm!"

"I know—who better? They would kill—my life would go out, too, and then—my child! The baby boy you saved, sir! He—for his sake, in his name, sir, pray heed my warning!"

Both hands now clasped that shoulder, and her pale face was wet with tears which she could not hold back longer.

Prince John ceased to struggle to rid his mouth of that choking gag, and the woman spoke on in unsteady tones:

"I vowed then to repay my great debt, if ever the chance came my way, sir. The baby—all the one death has left a poor mother! Only for your heroism he must have perished—must have been burned to death—turned to ashes so scattered that a mother would not have known what to weep, what to pray over!"

"I took an oath then to repay life for life, if ever the occasion arose, and now—this!"

The last word came chokingly, and hands covered bending face, as if trying to conceal that hot flush of wretched shame; but as quickly rallying once more, Rika Dussing added:

"It is clear enough, sir? You know now how I learned of your death-doom, and why I have come—like this?"

"I will give life for life, as I said, but—I would like to live longer, for my baby boy's sake! So—say you will never betray me! Say you will never speak of me, and of this night!"

"If you do—I am a dead woman! My life will be forfeit, and—ach, my God! Who knows? It may even be his hand which is elected to remove the transgressor!"

In her intense agitation over what was and what might be, Rika Dussing seemingly lost all thought of their present peril from the fire-trap, but not so Prince John. And as he saw the wooden bowl fairly split into nearly equal portions, its bottom eaten through by the fire, he gave his companion a sharp nudge, and with nodding head called her attention to that quarter.

Mrs. Dussing took in the situation at a single glance, and then rose to her feet, a hand urging the detective to follow her example.

"It is time; come with me, Mr. Prince," she said, hastily, moving off toward the rear corner of that apartment. "Careful—no sounds!"

In that corner, only partially lit up by the fire, as yet, was the landing of a steep flight of stairs, and down this darkening passage the detective was led by his rescuer.

All was gloom on the ground floor, but Prince John yielded blind obedience to that guiding hand; and presently the woman paused, to whisper once more:

"We must wait until the fire comes, now! Until then—Virgin Mother!"

At that instant the turpentine-barrel exploded, with an almost deafening roar, and even there a flood of light was cast as the heated liquid flew in a fiery flood over the greater portion of the second floor!

"Now—come!" hoarsely cried the excited woman, as part of that destructive rain spattered down the stairs, giving them more light. "We can go, now, and—after me, for your life, sir!"

Rika Dussing led the way to a small, narrow door in the rear of that building, which was found unlocked and unbolted, doubtless having been so left by her as a method by which a hurried escape might be effected.

As yet the fire cast no light outside, to the rear, and once or twice Prince John stumbled over unseen obstacles where the woman passed with seeming ease, thanks no doubt to her better acquaintance with their surroundings.

No form rose up to oppose their escape, for which the Insurance Detective felt devoutly grateful, since he would have been utterly helpless for attack or defense, just then.

"Now—it is time!" suddenly spoke Rika Dussing, as she turned to face the detective, bared blade in hand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A WIFE'S PLEA.

THE Special's first thought was that the end of life had indeed come, for the woman clutched an arm with what seemed vicious fury, while that gleaming blade was surely aimed against his life!

The next instant he realized his mistake, for the steel touched only the hempen cords which held his arms helpless, and while freeing his hands, Rika Dussing added:

"Say that you will come! Swear that you will make no attempt to spread the alarm or to help fight this fire—swear it, or you will be dooming me to a death as sure if not quite as cruel as the one I am trying to cheat for my baby's sake!"

His arms swung free, and the blood which had for so long been impeded in its circulation, already began to sting and to prick beneath the skin, glad proof that liberty had come to him once again, even after he had abandoned all hope.

And then, knowing that all this was due to her whose pale, scared face was turned up toward his, Prince John yielded—her trembling hands were urging him to renewed flight, and—he yielded!

After all, he was little better than a cripple, just now. His arms were nearly helpless, and promised to be mere painful incumbrances for some minutes to come. And, too, he was unarmed, in case the watching fire-bugs should chance upon them. But—above all rose that scared plea!

Right or wrong, Mrs. Dussing believed that delay on his part meant death to her, and from

his past experience, Prince John could readily understand how that might well be, too.

Instead of following the alley to which her guiding steps had carried them, this woman led the flight across the block, reaching another street by crowding through between two store-buildings, and only then did she slacken that mad pace; for, just then the first alarm of fire was given!

Knowing now that he could be of no service in that direction, Prince John readily yielded to Rika Dussing's wish for further flight, and for a few minutes longer all their energies were bent on increasing the distance which now lay between that doomed building and themselves.

While hurrying along, seemingly mates rather than guide and guided, the detective's brain was busily at work.

This woman had let sufficient fall to show that she was far into the secrets of the fire-bug gang, even if she was not a regular member thereof. Then—why not learn all she could tell?

It was a temptation, the full power of which only a detective could realize. From her lips he surely might learn all: the names, rank, relative importance of each and every member of that lawless aggregation.

From her—why not? Surely one who knew so much, would know who stood at the head of that vile band? And, after what he had suffered while so helplessly in the power of that demon in human shape, Prince John felt that he would gladly give a band to bring him to the bar of justice, if no less price would avail!

By this time the alarm had spread further. The fire-bells had caught it up, and already there could be distinguished the distant yet wild excitement and uproar which is the inseparable accompaniment of a big fire in a dangerous portion of a large, closely built city.

By this time their hurried flight had carried them to a fairly retired spot, where there was less danger of interruption from either friend or foe; and then, for the first time since setting his arms at liberty, Mrs. Dussing faced the detective, clearly intending to remove that gag from between his jaws.

"Gone!" she huskily ejaculated, shrinking back a pace as she noticed the fact. "You have—I meant—"

"Can I speak now, without breaking faith, Mrs. Dussing?" asked the detective, a hand going out to gently touch that arm, but meaning to instantly turn to a grip in case the woman should attempt to run away.

"You know—my name?"

"I saw you that night, when I saved your child, ma'am, and I remembered the name some one uttered in my hearing," quickly explained the detective, knowing he could hope for little information while that sudden terror lasted. "You have saved mine, now! I am grateful—very thankful for that, dear madam!"

"It is so? That is not—you really mean that, sir?"

"How can you doubt it, Mrs. Dussing? Only for your coming—only for your brave rescue—where would I be, now?"

"Then—have pity on me! Spare my life, if only for the baby's sake!" Rika huskily plead, trembling hands clasping his arm as they stood there in the shadows together.

"My life is yours, madam, if you ask for it," gravely assured the detective, almost before he realized to what an extent he might thus be pledging himself. "Surely your life is not—"

"It is forfeited—it is lost, unless you help me, sir! Not that living longer is such a blessing, only—my child! For his sake, then, I ask you to show mercy, have pity!"

Prince John began to catch an inkling of her meaning, now, but it would save time and a possible misunderstanding if still more open speech was won, and he quickly said:

"Tell me just what it is you wish me to do, Mrs. Dussing, please."

"Nothing—to do nothing at all until I have time to save my boy baby, sir!" came the eager answer. "If you knew—if they—oh, sir, I believe all this trouble is turning my poor brain!"

She staggered like one losing strength, and possibly would have fallen outright only for the quick support lent her by the detective.

For a few moments she lay almost helpless in that manly embrace, while Prince John whispered what encouragement he dared give, on the spur of the moment; for even to a member of that lawless gang he would not make a promise or give a pledge which he could not fulfill.

Rika Dussing apparently broke down mentally as well as physically, so far as will power was concerned, for she no longer attempted to maintain even a pretense of reserve; she sobbingly told how she had learned of that cruel death-sentence, and how she felt in duty bound to preserve from such a horrible doom the brave rescuer of her only living child.

This she had been enabled to do, as he already knew, but now—

"Those men were watching all the time, to see that you did not free yourself before the fire-trap exploded! They were guarding against

any attempt on the part of the police or your friends to rescue you, in time! And now—if the Bund learns that you have escaped with life, like this, they will know you were saved by one of themselves!"

"I will not believe that you belong to such a devilish outfit, Mrs. Dussing!" declared the detective, firmly.

"No—yet—oh, sir!" rallying with feverish energy once more. "It is true—too horribly true! I went to them, when I learned what fate had been pronounced against you, and I begged for pity, for mercy—upon my knees I prayed and pleaded for the life of the gallant gentleman who had snatched my baby from out the very jaws of death!"

"You did this? For my sake, Mrs. Dussing?"

"I did, sir—and why not? I owed you a life, and now—oh, I thought I could pay my debt without stopping to count what it might cost me in the end, but now—have mercy, I implore you, sir!"

"What is it you wish me to do, Mrs. Dussing?"

"To say nothing, do nothing, attempt nothing until I have had time to save my loved ones, sir!" came the eager, quavering reply. "Will you, sir? There is no other hope—listen, sir!"

"If it is known that you have escaped from the fire-trap, I will be the first one suspected, for only members—only those who knew of the terrible doom could have reached your side without being detected by those on watch."

"That—oh, sir! That would shift the death-doom from your head to mine! That would mean death to me, to my child, my husband as well!"

The woman, like one who realizes she has said far too much, clapped a hand over her lips, giving a low, wailing cry as she shrunk away from the detective. But Prince John gently restrained her, saying, in turn:

"Have no fears, Mrs. Dussing, for you have told me nothing more than I already knew; that Bernard Dussing, your husband, is one of the gang!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PRINCE JOHN'S DECISION.

ANOTHER moaning cry, another shrinking from the strong yet kindly hands which restrained her flight.

"I have known all this, I repeat, Mrs. Dussing, so that nothing you have this night performed has added at all to the peril of your husband. To the contrary, it may end in saving his liberty, if not his very life!"

"You mean—you will not—"

"For your sake, Mrs. Dussing, I am willing to give him another chance in life. If—will you urge him to flight, at once, then?"

"To flight—from—you?"

"To flight from arrest which surely awaits all members of the Liberty Bund, as they term themselves," a bit more sternly said the detective. "And, with the amount of proof which has already been accumulated against them, arrest means conviction, and that—death for some, a prison life for all others!"

"Mercy—show mercy, dear gentleman!" gasped the poor woman, trying to sink to her knees at his feet, but held back by those strong hands.

"I am offering you all the mercy at my disposal, Mrs. Dussing, and if your husband will only pledge himself to flee from Frisco without loss of time, I will guarantee his escape, not only from the law, but from the other members of this lawless gang. For your sake—as part reward for saving my life this night, my dear woman!"

"You will—it is not—not [a trick to discover—]"

"Why should I attempt to trick you, Mrs. Dussing? What is there to hinder me from arresting your husband, first of all the band?"

"If I did not tell—"

"Could I not hold you a prisoner? Could I not set the police force at work, guarding every avenue of escape from town? Try to believe me when I swear that I will help your family to escape the general doom which awaits the fire-bugs, Mrs. Dussing."

"You do make oath, sir?"

"On my honor as a man. More—by the grave of my sainted mother, Mrs. Dussing! Only—you must decide at once! Will you trust me?"

"I will—for I must!"

"You shall never regret that trust, Mrs. Dussing," gravely declared the Insurance Detective, then quickly adding: "Now, take me to where I can see your husband!"

"You will not—he is so—"

"You must trust me from start to finish, Mrs. Dussing, else I can be of no material service," a bit sharply asserted Prince John, realizing that he must play the master, if only in order to save valuable time. "I must see your husband: where may he be found at this hour?"

The woman was conquered, as the detective had calculated, and meekly bowing to a superior will, she moved away from the retired spot where she had made her plans, and Prince John had reached so important a decision.

Although they could still distinguish sounds coming from the fated building in which the fire-bugs had so atrociously sentenced the Insurance Detective to a horrible death, they were far enough away to escape unwelcome notice, while their course led them along an almost deserted street.

Now that the woman had fairly accepted his decision, Prince John had no fault to find on the score of delay; Mrs. Dussing hurried along through the night, each moment leaving that ruddy sky-glow further behind, each minute carrying the twain nearer an outskirt of the city.

Prince John had a fair general idea of the locality, but he asked no questions during that hurried progress. He knew that Mrs. Dussing was acting in good faith, and he was preparing for what might lie ahead.

Of course he was without arms, save such as nature provides; but he would hardly need any deadly weapons, unless others of the fire-bugs should be with Bernard Dussing.

Even then, Prince John felt fully able to care for himself, and he had strong faith that, in such an emergency, he might pretty safely rely on the aid and backing of Rika Dussing, mother of the child he had so gallantly saved from death by fire.

Still, it was just as well to take no longer chances than he could help, and when the woman huskily whispered that they were now drawing near to the humble home they had found after losing their all in that unfortunate fire, the Special picked up a fairly serviceable club which the moonlight revealed to his searching glance.

"Not for Dussing, ma'am, but in case any others of the gang should happen to be with him," Prince John said, in explanation, as Rika gave a muffled exclamation.

A moment's hesitation, then she offered him the knife by means of which his bonds had been so opportunely severed, saying, gravely:

"Take this, sir! See—I am trusting you—for my dear ones' sake! Take this, and if any others—shall I enter first, to see?"

Without waiting for permission, the woman sprang toward the rude building, through the uncurtained windows of which shone a dim light, as a lamp or of candle.

There was hardly a doubt as to her perfect good faith, but Prince John was taking no extra chances, just then, and when Mrs. Dussing opened the front door, he was close to her heels.

A man within sprang to his feet with an angry oath, which changed to a hoarse cry of terror as he recognized that face just back of his wife's head; but before he could do or say more, Prince John pushed over the sill, kicking the door shut behind himself as he sternly spoke:

"Go easy, Dussing! Try to kick up a row, and I'll down you for keeps, but play sensible—tell him, Mrs. Dussing!"

"A friend—to save us all, husband!"

Gently balancing that heavy club in one hand, while the other rested in ostentatious carelessness at his right hip, as though touching the ready butt of a revolver, Prince John lost no time in showing himself full master of the situation.

"It is naked truth, Bernard Dussing, and the swifter you realize all that, the better off you'll be!"

"Your wife saved me from the death-trap you fire-bugs planned for my eternal removal, and because of that service, I've promised her that you shall have one more chance for your life and liberty. Now—will you take advantage of this chance, Dussing?"

Rika Dussing added her plea, and the terrified fire-bug seemed to be gathering in all the startling truth.

"If you utter a word, or give hint of danger to any other member of the gang, though, Bernard Dussing, I take back my promise and publish broadcast how I was rescued from death by fire, and in addition will swear that you, Bernard Dussing, helped Rika, your wife, to set me at liberty!"

"No—no! That would be death!" gasped the terrified man.

"I know all that, which is precisely why I am giving you the warning, or the threat, just as you may look at it," coldly added the Insurance Special. "The whole gang is spotted and marked for arrest. So were you, before this night!"

"I never—before heaven—"

"Stop!" with stern emphasis. "Lying can't save you, but the generous actions of your wife may, unless you are too big an idiot to accept the chance now offered you. It is for her sake, and for her sake alone, that I am giving you a show to cheat the law you have so maliciously outraged!"

"Now, Bernard Dussing, decide, once for all. Will you wait here to be arrested for arson, or will you take to flight while the way is open?"

Mrs. Dussing added her plea to the stern warning given the fire-bug by the detective, and knowing that this leniency was far more than he had any right to expect from the man he had aided to capture and condemn, the fire-bug made his yielding known.

"The brothers will suspect, but better suspect than know! I will go, sir, and that without warning any of the others! Yes—we will go,

and I swear to you, sir, that I will leave no warning sign behind!"

"Better so, Mr. Dussing," with grim meaning making itself clear to both husband and wife. "If you should forget your oath, though, that same warning sign will be a good epitaph for your grave-stone!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A FACE AND A SHOT.

SHARP enough words, but the Insurance Detective might have called even less agreeable speech to his aid, only for the mutely appealing eyes of the woman who had so bravely foiled the diabolical designs of the allied fire-bugs and dynamiters.

Still, those words cowed Bernard Dussing, which was the main object, after all, and then Prince John bluntly asked:

"What name do you call the Master by, when he's not filling the Red Throne, Dussing?"

The man flinched visibly, but then declared his ignorance.

"We only know him as the Master, the chief, the head and soul of our section of the Liberty Bund."

Naturally enough Prince John doubted the truth of this answer, and made no bones about letting that belief be known; but the fire-bug took his solemn oath that he had spoken nothing save the naked truth, and his wife added her earnest assurance to the same effect.

The Master kept his identity thoroughly veiled, and if a favored few of the Liberty Bund knew what and who the chief might be, in private life, Bernard Dussing was not among that favored company.

She could say this much, for together they had wondered over that mystery, and tried in vain to solve it to their own satisfaction.

After this earnest assurance from Rika's lips, there was nothing left but for the detective to accept the assertion for truth, and trust for better luck in the future.

With a final hint for the family to effect their flight as speedily as practicable, Prince John withdrew, but only far enough to secure cover from whence he could keep watch over that place.

He felt little uneasiness so far as the woman was concerned, since he knew her dread of the fire-bugs would urge her to speedy flight; but he was far from being as well satisfied concerning Bernard Dussing.

He believed the fellow was evil to the very core, treacherous as well as vindictive; and while there might be a certain degree of risk attached to himself through so doing, it was only too likely the fellow might try to warn his associates of the impending catastrophe.

For this reason, then, the Insurance Detective watched and took note, resolved to act the instant he saw aught suspicious in the conduct of the criminal he was giving a chance for escape; but as after events seemed to prove, his suspicions were without foundation in fact.

As Prince John had seen for himself while inside that rude, dilapidated building, there was little furniture, and less valuables. It was merely a temporary shelter for the "burned out unfortunates," and such being the case, there was not much to be done in the way of packing up before taking to flight.

Long before the dawn of the new day, Rika Dussing, with their child in her arms, and Bernard Dussing carrying a small bundle of clothes and bedding, wound about with a rope, left that shanty and hastened off in the direction of the nearest station.

With practiced skill Prince John followed, keeping them in sight from start to finish, and ready to turn that flight toward the jail in case the fire-bug should attempt to communicate with any other member of that now doomed gang.

Nothing of the sort happened, however, and the Insurance Detective drew a long breath of relief as he saw the trio enter a car and the train pull out for the far-away East!

Even if Bernard Dussing had actually contemplated treachery, he had been kept under such keen surveillance as to render his hopes futile. He had gone, now, and the remainder of that lawless gang was at the mercy of the man whom they had doomed to death after such a diabolical manner.

For two nights past, Prince John had hardly caught a wink of sleep, while his rest had been broken for as much further back; still, he could not treat his wearied body until after making his mind at ease.

When fully satisfied that the Dussing family were fairly in flight for some unknown destination, and so wholly eliminated from the situation, Prince John fell to work with characteristic energy.

First and foremost, he felt that it was essential to his plans the fire-bugs should believe he had perished in that fire; and though he had no doubt as to their keeping his secret intact, so far as they themselves were concerned, he hardly dared trust either Paulette or McAleney with his actual whereabouts.

Even to call upon either, though using a dis-

guise, might result in exposing his escape to some of that evil league.

So, briefly writing that he was in safety, yet deemed it best to lie low for a day or two longer, Prince John asked Chief Paulette to place trusty watch over those names he inclosed, and to arrest any or all of whom who might attempt to leave the city before his, the writer's, return.

This warning sent off, Prince John made his way to the house of a member of an insurance firm, to whom one of his letters of introduction had been addressed, and finding the gentleman at breakfast, gladly joined him at table; and then, revealing just sufficient for his purpose, secured a loan of a few dollars, for which he knew he would have speedy need.

Pledging the gentleman to utter silence for the present, Prince John left that house, and entering a pawnbroker's shop, bought a pair of heavy revolvers, with cartridges to fit.

This he did, knowing how seldom the factory-made sights on new revolvers made for the trade, are accurately adjusted, as to shooting high or low. And, as he grimly told himself, if he should actually need these weapons, he would need them too badly to experiment before getting down to solid business!

Now, the most urgent of his business attended to, Prince John sought out a retired spot where he felt he could at least part way "catch up" with his broken sleep schedule, and "letting all holds go," lost all cares in slumber most profound.

That sleep lasted until nearly sundown, but Prince John did not at all regret the waste of time. He felt "a new man," physically speaking, and his brain was clear as a bell.

Hurrying off when fairly awake, the Insurance Special paid a visit to the lonely shanty which the Dussings had so hastily abandoned at his warning, finding it just as he had last seen the place. Apparently no one had been there, and as he made a silent tour through the place, an idea struck Prince John quite favorably.

Pondering over this for a minute or two, the detective fell to work with a spool of thread which he found in the front room, deftly tying bits across each door and window, so that no person could effect an entrance without breaking the tell-tales.

"And they're so frail that nobody would notice it, either!" he assured himself, with a soft, congratulatory chuckle as he completed the odd work.

This done, Prince John hurried away in search of supper, for his healthy stomach was reminding its owner that there was one other schedule which ought to be filled up, even if quantity had to supply the lack of regularity!

The Insurance Detective took his time about that evening meal, once he found an eating-house, for he was willing to give his trap time to prove its value; but it was yet quite early in the evening when Prince John retraced his steps to that vicinity.

The shanty was dark, and gave no token of occupancy. Nor did any one appear near the place during the hour or more during which the detective lay low, watching and waiting.

Then, feeling tolerably well assured that he need fear no unwelcome callers, Prince John advanced, to inspect his thread-telltales.

He found them intact, which almost surely proved that no one had visited the house during his absence.

"Of course that's no security that some of the gang won't drop in for a bit of a chat with Dussing," muttered the detective, as he made his few arrangements for passing the remainder of the night under that roof. "If so—well, if I can't arrest, I can wing, I reckon!"

By the light which entered at an uncurtained window at the side of a low bedstead which had been long abandoned by the fleeing family, and which he had resolved to occupy for that night, Prince John inspected his revolvers, making sure they were in working condition, then lying down and pulling the heavy bearskin well over his form.

Time passed on, and the full moon showed itself at the window, the small panes of glass partly dimming the refulgence by virtue of dust and cobwebs.

Although the bed proved comfortable enough, so far as that went, it was no easy matter for Prince John to fall asleep.

For one thing, he had slept sufficient for the time being, and then his brain was busily at work—trying to bring order out of chaos, and at the same time puzzling over that enigma: who was "The Master?"

The night was more than half spent before anything out of the ordinary happened; but then the detective was keenly upon the alert, right hand gripping a revolver which had lain under his head until now, eyes wide open and ears strained to the utmost.

Only a faint, indistinct sound: nothing which could have disturbed the rest of even the lightest sleeper; yet quite sufficient to warn the Insurance Detective that he had enemies, cunning as they were unscrupulous, and that—*Steady, now!*

That faint noise seemed ascending the wall at the head of his bed, and then, after a brief

pause, a board directly overhead gave a faint but unmistakable creak, as though being lifted out of its usual bed.

Looking upward without moving more than his head and eyes, Prince John saw another board move aside, then caught a glimpse of a human face in the opening thus formed. And without stopping to see more, he flung up his right hand and fired a single shot!

CHAPTER XXX.

TAKING HIS OWN MEDICINE.

THE very instant he pulled trigger, Prince John leaped off that bed and across the room, taking the bearskin with him as cover. One end of the robe was flung over a standing chair, the other covering his person as he crouched down there in the shaded corner, breathlessly listening.

Even while making that premeditated movement, the detective heard a muffled cry from the owner of that face, closely followed by a fall and a clatter; and now, as he crouched there under cover, pistol in hand and ready for use, he heard a shrill, terrified screech!

That sound came from the other side of the partition-wall, and recalling the mental notes he had taken when examining the premises, Prince John knew his dimly seen visitor had fallen down in a sort of summer-kitchen, or frail lean-to standing against the main building.

Yells and curses and hardly articulate words came from the other room, accompanied with sounds as of desperate struggles, if not of actual combat between human foes.

A confused jargon—part Italian, part English, all wild, frantic, mingled rage and terror!

"Take 'em off! They're eating me up! They're biting me all to pieces!" fairly shrieked that voice, and unable to comprehend just how much of peril those sounds might cover for himself, Prince John waited no longer, but took instant action.

Wrapping that bearskin around him, he rose to his feet, and making a rush, sprung through that window, carrying both sashes with him, sending the shattered glass in a clattering shower far and wide!

Thanks to the bearskin, no harm came to the daring detective through the flying glass, and he quickly rallied from the shock of alighting on the hard ground, dashing away to the nearest shadow, there crouching down with pistols out and ready for use in case of need.

Scarcely had he done this, when the door of the summer-kitchen flew open, and the figure of a single man reeled forth, his hands—godsd!

Each hand grasped a writhing snake by the middle, brandishing them crazily, while the venomous reptiles struck repeatedly with their fangs, their tails rattling furiously.

"Devils! Ingrates! To sting—to bite—to die, then!" shrieked the being, whom Prince John now recognized as Niccoli Vivaldi, the "Snake-man," dashing the rattlesnakes to earth with frantic violence.

As he did this, the bitten knave seemed to stagger drunkenly, and turning partly around, he ran swiftly for a few yards, only to pause, to reel, to fling up his arms and fall to the ground, another awful shriek bursting from his bleeding lips.

Prince John was on the point of springing to the rescue, when he caught the distant trill of a police-whistle, and he waited to answer that call in kind.

A reply came at once, and knowing that aid would quickly be there, the Special hurried forward, his flesh creeping and tingling as he heard at least one of those venomous snakes rattling in warning.

"You're poisoned, man!" he cried, bending over that groaning, writhing figure, yet even now keeping well on guard against a possible knife-thrust. "What made you—were those snakes intended for me, then?"

Still sharper came those words, for the truth flashed upon the Insurance Detective with full force, just then.

It had been another attempt to put him off the trail forever! He had been chosen as a victim for those venomous serpents, and now—the Italian was suffering from a liberal dose of his own medicine!

The trampling of heavy feet announced the coming of one or more policemen, and turning that way, Prince John saw a couple of patrolmen coming, with clubs drawn and pistols ready for use.

He hurried forward to meet them, knowing that the quickest if not the only safe way through lay in his disclosing his identity, and he was hardly ready as yet to let the Snake-man into his secret, for—

"Yet, surely the Italian already knew who he was?"

Fortunately for the saving of time, if for nothing else, one of the officers instantly recognized the detective, having seen him in company with Chief Virgo Paulette, so explanations were confined almost entirely to the case immediately in hand.

One of the officers bent over the groaning wretch, on whom the poison inserted through so many bites, was already taking powerful effect, while Prince John, first killing the crippled rat-

tlers he had seen Vivaldi hurl to earth, cautiously inspected the interior of the summer kitchen.

Their appearance was greeted by a vicious rattling, and when the pocket-lantern carried by the officer was flashed in that direction, other venomous reptiles were discovered near a broken box lying on the floor, in which the snakes had undoubtedly been conveyed thither.

It did not take long to dispatch the sluggish reptiles, and when fairly satisfied that there were no others lurking nigh, a brief but thorough inspection was given the place.

The result of this inspection may be briefly summed up; beyond a doubt Niccoli Vivaldi had learned of Prince John's intention to sleep under that roof, and on his part determined to make that a final night's slumber for the fire-bugs' dreaded foe.

Carrying the wire-screened pine box, the Human Snake climbed up to that loosely-floored loft, meaning to empty his poisonous snakes fairly upon the sleeping detective, knowing that it would be morally impossible for him to escape without receiving enough bites to insure his death.

Then—the shots, which either wounded or scared him into falling back just as he had opened that box of crawling death—the fall, when those already irritated serpents dropped all over him—the bites, the blind fight, the staggering forth under the calm moon—then, death?

So Prince John decided when he once more stood near that moaning, shuddering shape. Already the hands and face of the Italian were swollen greatly, and with each minute that passed by, his chances for life were lessened to that degree.

Asking one of the officers to send in a call for the ambulance, the Insurance Detective tried to learn something from the poisoned wretch, if only sufficient to confirm his belief as to how that catastrophe came to pass.

That much was not difficult: in his terror Niccoli Vivaldi let the truth escape him, not only confessing that he had meant to slay the detective by casting the poisonous contents of that box upon him as he lay sleeping below, but more: that this was a scheme of his own devising, and that he had not taken any other member of the Liberty Bund into his confidence, lest he be forced to share the devilish glory which would crown the gallant brother who could say—"Ye owe all this to my skill and fidelity, Master!"

But when Prince John essayed to learn *who* that Master was, the poisoned wretch close-locked his lips, refusing even a moan or a gasp of agony to escape, lest with it might leak out aught which would brand him traitor to the Master or to the Bund.

This at first. But when the deadly poison made itself felt still more rapidly, that grim nerve gave way, and again the poor devil begged for help, for relief, for rescue from such an awful death!

"We'll do all we can for you, man," said the detective. "We've sent in a call for the wagon already, and when—"

"Brandy—rum! Drink—give me drink—oceans of it!" hoarsely cried the wretch, trying to regain his footing, but falling back helplessly. "Help! Drink—I am dying by—oh, save me, kind gentlemen!"

Prince John sent the second policeman off in quest of liquor of some description, and then repeated his effort to win a positive clue to the personage who undoubtedly stood at the head of that lawless gang.

It was less easy now to make Vivaldi comprehend his wishes, but at last the detective succeeded, so far. No further, though!

The Snake-man groaningly declared that he did not know the name of the Master, had never seen his face, or heard his voice save while the Liberty Bund was in session.

"I'll tell you all—name, rank, all—tell you all about the rest, if you'll only—take them off!" his husky tones rising to a shrill, piercing shriek as he fought against the imaginary serpents with which he was now covered from crown to sole!

CHAPTER XXXI.

DRAWING THE NET.

WHEN the ambulance came up, Prince John resigned charge of the Human Snake, after duly cautioning the officers not to mention his name in connection with the affair any more prominently than they absolutely had to, since he had not yet fully decided upon the course he was to take next.

Although the hour was a late one, and the chances long against his finding Chief Paulette at his office, Prince John at once hurried off in that direction, deeming it nothing more than common prudence to get all in readiness for drawing the net as speedily as possible.

Since it was absolutely certain that one of that lawless gang had discovered his escape from the fire-trap, he could have no certainty as to all other members being in greater ignorance, despite the declaration of Niccoli Vivaldi that he had kept the secret close for his own ultimate glory.

"Still, if the chief had gumption enough to act on the hint I gave him, in my note, it'll be all right, no matter how many of the outfit has found out my cheating the fire. So—here's for ye, old man!"

It was more of a disappointment than a surprise when Prince John failed to find the chief of police at his office; but with an officer to act as guide (for the Insurance Special was hardly perfect in his knowledge of the many streets, as yet, while the time and step-saving telephone was yet in the womb of the future,) the detective made rapid time in covering the ground lying between office and residence.

After that, work was more rapid, and the first steps were being taken while Prince John was crisply sketching his line of adventures since their last parting.

Chief Paulette had received the note sent by the Insurance Detective the day before, and having learned to place particular dependence on what Prince John offered as facts or suggestions, and as the list of names given corresponded with those Herman Richter declared were members of the Liberty Bund, Chief Paulette promptly acted on that advice.

Each and every man named by Prince John was now under surveillance by trusted officers who had orders to arrest immediately if any step intimating flight from Frisco was taken.

And only waiting to hear that the detective deemed it advisable to draw the net without further delay, the chief dispatched the policeman in attendance, to spread the word.

In his note, Prince John had made especial mention of Niccoli Vivaldi and Ivan Petroff, the Russian bomb-thrower; and now, learning that the residence of the dynamiter was known to the chief, he again impressed on that official the importance of making sure of the anarchist among the earliest arrests.

"Go with me, and we'll run him in ourselves," decided Paulette, with unusual bluntness for him.

And so it came to pass: when the gray of dawn was yet dim and uncertain toward the east, the peaceful repose of the owlish anarchist was rudely disturbed, and without roar of dynamite or crashing of bombs, the Child of the White Czar submitted to have vulgar irons locked upon his wrists, and to be forced like a very cur through the streets to the Central Station.

Other arrests had been made, even so soon, but both Prince John and Virgo Paulette had shrewdly elected this patriarchal-looking Russian as probably affording the most profitable soil for cultivation through which they might garner a full crop of the fruit most to their tastes, just then.

It was not often that Chief Paulette cared to admit an outsider to share in the mysteries of his "sweat-box," or to obtain even a glimpse of his method of "pinching" a prisoner until he "squealed," but Prince John was an exception, and his assistance proved very valuable, too.

Enough has been recorded to show what manner of man the Russian bomb thrower was, while at liberty; loud-mouthed, ranting, full of fire and fury, yet not without a certain desperate daring, as was proven by his attempt on the lives of Prince John and Orson McAleney.

All was different, now! Cornered, ironed, confronted by the punishment due his deeds, Ivan Petroff first lost his coolness, then his nerve, lastly the control of his limber tongue!

Long before Chief Paulette had exhausted his list of ingenious traps and snares, the dynamiter yielded, and showing himself a most arrant cur, confessed all that an official heart could wish for!

And all that Prince John could desire, as well, with a single exception: he vigorously vowed that he only knew the Master as the Master, and that he had never succeeded in penetrating the veil of mystery which the chief of the Frisco Fire-bugs had invariably worn.

Prince John felt rather more than half convinced that the fellow was lying in this particular, and from his station behind the prisoner he made a sign which was readily interpreted by the head of police.

"Pinch him tighter!" that signal said. "He knows: make him blow the gaff before he catches his lost nerve!"

Chief Paulette acted promptly on that hint, for he, as well as the Insurance Special, felt that their victory would be far from complete unless they could show the leading spirit in that long series of crimes through which the Golden Gate City had suffered of late.

But either the Russian lacked the information they were so determined to extract, or else he had rallied his nerve sufficiently to make his lies sound very like truth; for try as Paulette might, he failed to win the information on which so much depended.

Then Prince John took the matter in hand, but with little better results, even though he promised the Russian leniency provided he made a full and complete confession.

Ivan Petroff begged for the hinted-at mercy, but in the same breath he declared, by all the saints, that he had never seen the face of the fire-bug chief, nor heard his name, other than one of those two titles.

"I begin to believe the rascal," muttered Prince John as he drew to one side with the chief of police for consultation before taking any further steps. "Yet—it may pay to hold him in secret, for awhile?"

"I've reached that same conclusion, Mr. Prince. If the fellow knows anything more than he has already given up, I will guarantee to make him 'turn it up' before sundown."

Chief Paulette uttered these final words in a tone loud enough to be caught by the anxious ears of the dynamiter, and a muffled howl of angry apprehension broke from his bearded lips.

"Quiet, you cur!" sternly ordered Prince John as he stepped back to the chair in which the prisoner was seated.

"For, just then, there came a clear rapping at the door, and Chief Paulette stepped that way to inquire the cause.

"What is it, sergeant?" he asked, opening the door but a trifle.

"A gentleman to see you, chief," came the answer, with a salute. "I would not have ventured, only he insisted, saying that he had business of the utmost importance, and ought—"

"Who is he?"

"The lawyer, Noble Featherkyl, chief."

"Send him in, then," quickly decided the official, closing the door as he uttered the last words, and thus hindering his ears from catching the faint sound which broke from the Russian's lips.

But Prince John heard it, and bending low enough for his ear to fairly touch that magnificent mustache, he caught a few swiftly whispered words which sent a hot rush of blood to his strong face.

As Prince John rose up, he heard the quick steps approaching that apartment, and as Chief Paulette moved to open the door to admit his urgent caller, the Insurance Detective quickly stepped to the wall, where that swinging barrier would conceal his person from the visitor's eyes on first crossing the threshold.

A single sign reassured the chief, and as a tapping echoed through the door, just then, he swung it open, and Noble Featherkyl hastily entered—to stop short with a cry of angry alarm as he recognized that handcuffed prisoner, Ivan Petroff.

"That is him—L swear it!" fairly roared the dynamiter. "He killed Gerald Quayle, for—I saw him do it!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

FATE OF THE FIRE-BUGS.

ALMOST simultaneously with this damning accusation, Prince John swung the heavy door shut, and springing toward the astonished lawyer, sharply cried:

"Steady, sir! You're my meat!"

"A lie—off, ye devils!" thundered Featherkyl, rallying as swiftly, one hand striking at the detective, and, as he sprung back to gain more room for action, jerking forth a revolver from his hip-pocket.

But Chief Paulette took a hand in, now, and instantly grappled with the lawyer, securing that armed hand and trying to wrest from it that deadly weapon—deadly indeed!

Their legs became entangled as Prince John made his rush, likewise, and as all three fell to the floor in a desperately struggling heap, the pistol exploded, and a smothered yet savage cry of pain followed.

That human knot was quickly untangled, for Noble Featherkyl no longer resisted, and Chief Paulette had the revolver, gripped by the barrel, and he sprung to his feet.

But Noble Featherkyl lay shivering on the floor, already looking ghastly in the face, while the blood came in a stream from his left breast where a bullet from his own weapon had entered.

The alarm was speedily given, and the house surgeon hastened upon the scene, to lend what assistance lay in his power. But, almost from the first glance at that wound, he knew the doom of Noble Featherkyl was sealed, and gravely told his patient as much.

And then, scared half out of his remaining wits by the awful accident, Ivan Petroff told what he meant by charging the lawyer with murdering Gerald Quayle.

Long before that eventful day came to an ending, Noble Featherkyl knew that he would never live to witness a setting of that sun; and then, with a softening of nature such as so frequently marks the last minutes of a thoroughly wicked man's life, he made full and complete confession, not only as to the killing of Gerald Quayle, but touching other matters.

Those death-strokes were given by his hand, hoping thus to make the ruin of his successful rival in love complete, as well as to remove one who knew far too much for Featherkyl's safety, even though the gambler-lawyer held a crushing power over that unfortunate young man, through Gerald's passion for cards and high betting.

Through this power Noble Featherkyl forced Gerald to arrange that purposely imperfect

fire-trap in Richter's chamber, while he paid another member of the fire-bugs to drug the German and keep him so safely that he would be unable to prove an *alibi* when the accusation of attempted arson was made.

As promised, Gerald returned down-town after his quarrel with Herman Richter in the presence of Norah Quayle, and sought out the lawyer. He told of the row, and laughingly exhibited the scarf-pin with a tiger-eye setting, as further proof of his victory.

This had accidentally become fastened in his coat sleeve, and had not been discovered by Gerald until after he left the house. And now, feeling that no better opportunity would be offered him, Featherkyl enticed his luckless dupe to the spot where he was later found dead, and by the side of his victim the assassin placed that head of Sphinx, to bear mute yet strong testimony against Herman Richter!

As partial proof of his powers over poor Gerald Quayle, Noble Featherkyl told where might be found evidence of those gambling debts, together with two notes in the name of Bantry Quayle.

"Burn them," huskily asked the dying wretch. "No need to add—grief enough!"

But the dying sinner had not yet confessed all, and knowing now that he had received all the punishment that could be given him in this world, Noble Featherkyl begged for stimulants, so that he might make a clean breast of it all.

He did this by still further exculpating Herman Richter, making a death-bed oath that the German was innocent of all complicity in the incendiary fires which had so thoroughly aroused the Golden Gate City.

And then—as a climax—he declared that he was the head spirit in that section of the so-called Liberty Bund, being the masked mystery known to even his followers as merely "Chief" or "Master."

Two hours later, Noble Featherkyl drew his last breath.

With such ample proof gathered against the fire-bugs, it was a comparatively easy matter to dispose of their various cases.

With such influential personages as the chiefs of police and Fire Department, (to say nothing of Prince John, the Special, who had the great Insurance Trusts at his back,) to urge on the matter, those cases were speedily brought to trial, and each one of them ended in conviction.

Such being the truth, it is hardly necessary to state that Herman Richter was set at liberty without any trial, or even examination on either charge which had been lodged against him.

When Bantry Quayle learned the real facts concerning the killing of his son (barring the fact of those forgeries), his remorse was great, and from that hour he received Herman as another son.

In the course of time that relationship actually became a fact, for Norah married Herman, and neither wife, husband nor father-in-law ever regretted that happening.

Niccoli Vivaldi never lived to be arraigned for trial as one of the fire-bugs of Frisco. He died, as he had lived, by his snakes!

Ivan Petroff was deemed too dangerous a man to be permitted to run at large, and while a much lighter sentence was given him than would have been the case only for his exposure of Noble Featherkyl, he was sentenced for a term of years, and died while at San Quentin.

The Dussing family vanished from sight, and it is not known just what manner of ending came their way.

And Prince John?

Remained "The Detective Special," but that does not mean he confined himself to insurance problems, although he *did* work out more than one more tough tangle along that line in days to come.

THE END.

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